

## **Class, people and « the popular » in E.P. Thomson and R.C. Cobb: Popular Press and the awakening of working-class consciousness in Britain and France**

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### ABSTRACT

This essay tackles questions raised by a joint-reading of two major English historians of the 20th century, Thompson and Cobb, both of whom had links with communist historians and activists, and by my own research into French and British workers in France at the beginning of the industrial revolution. How does the study of «the popular press» benefit from their insights?

KEY WORDS: Popular Press, class consciousness, Thompson, Cobb

### I. A GENERATION OF BRITISH SOCIAL HISTORIANS

I never met E.P. Thomson. I studied under, and was fond of, Richard Cobb. One I read; the other I read and was honoured to be his friend. Thomson (1924-1993) and Cobb (1917-1996) had very different personalities. Both worked, in very different ways, on « the working class », whom Cobb, at least, would never have termed the *proletariat*. Both, in a way, were concerned with those whom, in George Orwell's term, were « the down and out ». In very different ways, they brought them back to life, they placed the economically poor centre-stage for French and British historians working in the later 20th century. Many social historians of France are in great debt to Richard; but he had few disciples or followers and was in no way a communist. His varied interests (*passions*, rather) and literary skills were almost too eclectic – Belgium as well as France, Simenon as well as Queneau. The work and approach of Thomson, by contrast, have echoes in the writings of Richard Hoggart (1918-> ), Raymond Williams (1921-88), and of many cultural and social historians in Britain. Cobb survived in pre- and post-war France partly through meals provided by friends in communist party cells. The French communist historian of the 1789 Revolution, Albert Soboul, was a close friend – his arrival in the middle of an Oxford tutorial Cobb

was holding put an end to that tutorial! – whereas Thompson, with his almost aristocratic demeanour, fought hard for dissident, non-mainstream, causes (including nuclear disarmament). In a long, affectionate piece Cobb devoted to Soboul, the latter's girl friends (including East German orthodox communists) loom larger than Soboul's communist interpretations of history<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, in 1946, E.P. Thompson formed the Communist Party Historians Group whose members included Christopher Hill (1912-2003) and Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012); this subsequently launched the influential journal *Past and Present*<sup>2</sup>. In Oxford, Christopher Hill, who reinterpreted 17th century England and its civil war, was a close friend of Cobb, as was Raymond Carr (1919->), historian of Spain and of Sweden and who like Cobb, believed: « I am old-fashioned and aged enough to believe that the best history is the work of the lone individual. »<sup>3</sup> Thompson thought otherwise, even though *The making of the English working class: TMEWC* was largely written working alone –while living in Siddal, Halifax, West Yorkshire; he based some of the work on his experiences with the local Halifax population. Thompson discussed *TMEWC* with other English historians. These included Cobb<sup>4</sup>.

One unexpected link between Thomson and several other of the British historians of his generation hitherto mentioned – Cobb included – is their « private-sector » education in what the English call « public schools ». Many of these historians were « low church»; Thompson notes the Methodist religion of several of those he studied, while reminding us that he was not himself a Christian<sup>5</sup>. Thompson, Cobb, Hill, Williams, Hoggart, Hobsbawm – all were affected, in various ways, by World War II. Finally, while both Thompson and Cobb had university careers, their activities, interests and « passions » loomed larger than Academe.

Cobb, working from the archives of the Seine *département*, resurrected in Balliol college lectures the anguished lives of Breton peasant girls who, having made it to Paris, lived a mean existence as prostitutes near Montparnasse before jumping off bridges into the Seine, in central Paris, and having the

<sup>1</sup> R. Cobb, *People and places*, Oxford, O.U.P., 1985. Cobb mentions that Soboul had not read Marx.

<sup>2</sup> Which published an article by Cobb. *Past and Present* itself notes that Thompson himself was absent from its pages during its early years. Cf. *Past and Present* «Origins and Early Years », n° 100, (1983).

<sup>3</sup> Carr in *The Spectator* in 2007.

<sup>4</sup> *TMEWC*, preface.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 918.

circumstances of their suicides recorded by semi-literate Paris policeman. Thompson was no less attentive to the parlance, the phrases of neo-industrial workers in early 19th century Britain than was Cobb of French peasants and sans-culottes. At times, reading Thompson, one thinks of the Nottinghamshire dialects in D.H. Lawrence novels, echoed in *The uses of literacy* (1957) of Richard Hoggart. Both Thompson and Cobb wrote exceedingly well, and were masters of the telling phrase. Both – as Thompson put it – broke down « the Chinese walls which divide the 18th from the 19th century and the history of working-class agitation from the cultural and intellectual history of the rest of the nation »<sup>6</sup>. For Cobb, people – individuals, rather – mattered; he was incapable, he said, of « any understanding of abstract thought »<sup>7</sup> – unlike Thompson. Thompson was perhaps more attentive to British and French ‘jacobin’ cross-currents than Cobb was to reciprocal French and British influences. For Cobb, Germany and the Germans were France’s hated *alter ego*. To a degree, there are passages in *TMEWC* centering on Jacobinism, Radicalism and religious non-conformism where Britain’s ties with America loom larger, or as large, as British ties with France: Jacobin France was anathema to the British middle classes. And Thompson, unlike Cobb, does not fear to generalise, where appropriate: « the history of each trade is different. But it is possible to suggest the outline of a general pattern » (p.279). Thompson, like Cobb, resurrected forgotten figures.

*« I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "Utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties ».*

Thompson in short, like Cobb and Carr (both non-Marxists) was attentive to the individual; even if, unlike them, he situated the individual in his community.

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<sup>6</sup> *TMEWC*, p.111.

<sup>7</sup> *A classical education*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1985.

Some would say « class »: but « class » for Thomson was primarily a relationship, not a structure, and class-consciousness reflected how experiences fashioned a culture – traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms. Reading Thompson invites one to re-read Engels, *The condition of the working-class in England in 1844* (1845 ). (Engels published in German). Reading both Engels and Thompson, one moves on to re-read Eric Hobsbawm, especially on the birth of the industrial revolution - *Industry and Empire* in particular (1968). In a sense, Cobb is more intra-European, Thompson both Atlanticist and Marxian. Both were every English. Unlike the more cosmopolitan Eric Hobsbawm.

These cursory generalisations may offend. They serve as the backcloth to our comments on Thompson.

## 2. INDUSTRY AND THE NEW WORKING CLASS.

In a passage in *TMEWC* where Thompson quotes both Marx and Engels (p.208-9), the conclusion is: « steam power and cotton mill = new working class. » Thomson immediately qualifies this: however pregnant the image of the « the dark Satanic mill » (used in the William Blake poem of 1804, and echoed countless times since by those singing the hymn « Jerusalem »), the working class include labour both before and after the industrial revolution. Thompson was concerned with what he terms « a working class structure of feeling » (p.213). Here, as later<sup>8</sup>, he moves away from a mere economic vision of « need » to argue how class-consciousness is fashioned by both the productive process and something more.

*« And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a logic in the responses of*

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<sup>8</sup> E.P. Thompson in discussion with C.L.R. James, 1983 – You Tube.

*similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way ».*

While cotton-mills loomed large for both Engels –studying working-class Manchester- and for Thompson (and indeed Hobsbawm), I intend now to centre on iron and coal workers . And I shall do so in France, in the 1820s. The angle chosen is not one that much concerned Thompson. But he does raise points in the following passage which can serve as an introduction to our remarks. Quoting Francis Place (1771- 1854) :

« If the character and conduct of the working-people are to be taken from reviews, magazines, newspapers, reports of the two Houses of Parliament and the Factory Commissioners, we shall find them all jumbled together as the ‘lower orders’, the most skilled and the most prudent workman, with the most ignorant and imprudent labourers and paupers, though the difference is great indeed, and indeed in many cases will scarce admit of comparison »,

Thompson adds:

*« Place is, of course, right : the Sunderland sailor, the Irish navy, the Jewish costermonger, the inmate of an East Anglian village workhouse, the compositor on The Times - all might be seen by their ‘betters’ as belonging to the ‘lower classes’ while they themselves might scarcely understand each others’ dialect »<sup>9</sup>.*

Such an absence of inter-comprehension, compounded by illiteracy, must have proved a lasting difficulty. Place’s comments and Thompson’s gloss highlight the points we shall now make : the prism of ‘bourgeois’ print representations minimises the diversity of the labour-force. But how can one access many of the latter, given widespread illiteracy and mutual incomprehension ? The « case-study » we shall look out compounds the difficulty : English and Welsh iron-workers in early industrial France. Before doing so, and considering issues of representations of the working-class as mediated in print periodicals, it is worth mentioning what Thompson has to say about William Cobbett (1763 – 1835), who both lambasted political corruption and the « bourgeois » press, and testified to the impact of industrialisation and capitalism on ordinary people’s

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<sup>9</sup> *TMEWC*,p.212.

lives. Thompson judgment is nuanced : in his chapter on « the field labourers » , « the largest group of workers in any industry », he states Cobbett « was both the greatest tribune of the labourers, had many supporters among the farmers and in the small market towns » and that « it is doubtful whether before 1830 many labourers knew his name or understood what he was about »<sup>10</sup>. Others have pointed out that the sale-price - one shilling for sixteen quarto pages - of his *Political Register*, a weekly that appeared almost continuously from January 1802 until 1835- was beyond the pocket of the average readers , working-class men clubbed together to buy it and discuss its contents together in public houses. Collective discussion and reading aloud to the illiterate were common trait for « popular audiences », including working class men in Britain and France, from the 1830s onwards. As to their periodicity, weeklies and monthlies were probably more readily available initially than daily newspapers. As noted by Raymond Williams (1865-1922), in 1961<sup>11</sup>, cheap penny Sundays, from the 1840s, were the most widely selling English newspapers. Politics took second place to a miscellany of material harking back to traditional forms of popular literature, crime-stories included.

### 3. BRITISH WORKERS IN FRANCE IN THE 1820 .

Based in Horsely, near Birmingham, Aaron Manby's iron-works was powered by steam-engines. Manby (1776-1850 ) produced, *inter alia*, iron bridges for the canals of the Black Country and the first iron-clad steam-powered ship that - manufactured in Horsely, disassembled and then reassembled in the port of London - crossed the Channel and plied down the Seine to Paris. Manby employed a Scottish chemist and engineer, Daniel Wilson (1790-1849), who, first in Horseley and London, then in Charenton, just outside Paris, became his right-hand man. In the 1820s, Wilson master-minded the diversification of Manby's industrial interests in France : from the production of steam-engines for the nascent French market, and the creation of a gas-lighting company just outside east Paris to the (over-) ambitious launch of an iron and coal-mining company in central France, at Le Creusot<sup>12</sup>. Both in Charenton and Le Creusot, Manby-Wilson employed both British and French labour in the belief British workers, often already employed in Horsely, would help train their French counterparts - in what would later be termed « a transfer of technology ». The

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<sup>10</sup> *TMEWC*, p. 249

<sup>11</sup> *The Long Revolution*, London, Chatto and Windus.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. our *La France des Wilson-Grévy*, forthcoming.

English economic historians, Chaloner and Henderson, helped save Manby from oblivion<sup>13</sup>. Here, working from Wilson family archives and those of Le Creusot companies, we draw on *TMEWC*, to ask questions of the work-force.

Sources help fashion the questions asked. Our view is from above, not below: letters to and from Wilson, labour-contracts in Le Creusot, are the prism through which we « see » the workers. Concern with unruly behaviour – can one speak of « disorder »? – is paramount. It is almost incidentally that one learns of the harsh working-conditions, and one wonders: « were they ‘harsh’ by comparison with those in other coal and iron-mining companies elsewhere in France in the mid-1820s »?

Two passages in *TMEWC* inform our view:

- i) « In urban and rural communities alike, a consumer consciousness preceded other forms of political or industrial antagonism. Not wages, but the cost of bread, was the most sensitive indicator of popular discontent » (p.68). Here, we are close to Cobb’s studies of bread riots across provincial France and, to a degree, in *sans-culotte* Paris<sup>14</sup>;
- ii) « I have tried to distinguish between the experience of different group – artisans, outworkers, and labourers – and to show how they were coming to act, think and feel, not in the old modes of deference and parochial seclusion, but in class ways »<sup>15</sup>.

To make a British and French labour-force work in tandem was arduous in the Charenton works, and even more so in Le Creusot. Not only did they speak different languages, many were illiterate; and for the largely untrained French workers from the Le Creusot region in central France to accept « British » leadership, some ten years after the Napoleonic wars ended, doubtless rankled. Labour contracts dating from 1826, bearing the signature of employer (often D. Wilson or his nephew J. Goodie) and employee, survive. The signature was often in the form of a cross, itself an indicator of illiteracy. The mayor of Le Creusot in 1833, after the Manby-Wilson company had been declared bankrupt, stated: only 20 of the 600 miners knew how to read. The overwhelming majority of the

<sup>13</sup> W.H. Chaloner et W.O. Henderson, « Aaron Manby, builder of the first iron steamship », Newcomen society, Science Museum, London, 10.2.1954.

<sup>14</sup> To which Thompson refers, *TMEWC*, p. 172, n.I.

<sup>15</sup> « Postscript » (May 1968) in *ibid.*, p. 937.

contracts are in French. Two contracts with John Griffiths, who had worked in Charenton, were drafted in English and signed there. A contract in French, concluded before a *notaire*, concerned 46 French workers who undertook to work in Le Creusot for a year, for 1 franc a day. Manby-Wilson were to provide board and lodging<sup>16</sup>. The harsh working conditions made some allowance for different French and British work-patterns. Placarded at the entry to the work-site, regulations during the 14-hour working day to be observed by every labourer distinguished at times between those working within and outside the factory and between French and British workers. « Work is to begin at 5 a.m. throughout the year; it ends with nightfall in winter and not before 7 p.m. in summer ». Lunch was between 9 and 10 a.m. for all. Tea-time (*le goûter*) was at 1 p.m. for English work-force, at 2 p.m. for the others. Was this to respect different cultures or to keep the work-forces separate? A final instruction prescribes: « any worker found in the *café* or *cabaret*, during working-hours, risks a fine of a franc each time. »<sup>17</sup>.

There is reason to believe that Griffiths and other British workers formed what used to be called « the aristocracy of labour ». As experienced puddlers, knowing how to remove the carbon from the iron ore, they trained French colleagues. Presumably, there were times when they discussed their experience and labour conditions elsewhere. Did this help fashion a « political consciousness »? What we do know is that iron and coal-masters in France corresponded about workers who moved, or absconded, from one work-site to another; Wilson's correspondence contains references to this. It also refers to « pastoral care ». At Charenton, with a labour-force of 640, a pastor served the workers' spiritual needs. At both Charenton and le Creusot, the employers were concerned about English workets over-indulging in French wine. Did wine help loosen tongues about French and British worker complaints, even to the point of a common class-consciousness?

#### 4. RAILWAYS, NEWSPAPERS AND WORKING-CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN MID- 19TH CENTURY FRANCE.

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<sup>16</sup> Some of the houses Manby-Wilson built still survive.

<sup>17</sup> Etablissement du Creusot. Mines de Houille et Fonderies Royales. Règlement. Arrêté au Creusot, le 15.10.1826. Signé Manby, Wilson et Cie. Archives, Académie François Bourdon, Le Creusot.

« With the railways », writes Hobsbawm, « Britain... entered the period of full industrialization »<sup>18</sup>. Railways, *inter alia*, made it possible to distribute daily newspapers nationwide. This did not happen overnight: the process took about fifty years. But, first in France, later in Britain, *le journal qui parle* - a newspaper that aped a popular vernacular style and discussed issues and news aimed at a popular audience, with serialised fiction as an « opium for the people » and which was hawked up and down the country for a dirt-cheap price (5 cmes., in France, 1863-> ; 1/2 d. in Britain, 1896->) – reached both urban and rural populations via the railway during the later nineteenth century<sup>19</sup>. There is reason to believe that working-class people travelled less by rail than did the middle class. Freight - food and goods for people in all classes living in major towns and suburbs – travelled across the country helping to create national « consumer » markets - cheap wine from south-west France reached Paris thus. In France, cheap newspapers travelling as bulk freight (following a favourable tariff rate from 1856 onwards) were despatched from Paris and, later, from major regional towns to outlying provincial markets. At first they eschewed politics. And even after 1870 and 1881 when stamp duties on cheap newspapers were removed in France<sup>20</sup>, the « popular dailies » that developed apace in no way resembled the great unstamped, politically engaged, press in early 19th century Britain; as noted, Thompson devoted several passages to William Cobbett's *Political register*. Despite the existence of many politically militant newspapers in France, the big-circulation dailies, from *Le Petit Journal* (1863->) on, avoided polemics by and large and, in a sense, were more newspapers than views-papers. They might help in the gradual process of winning over rural communities to the republic in the 1870s, but their « moderation » was in contrast with the violence of the militant, small-circulation, papers on the left and the right – be they socialist or radical, monarchist or bonapartist. It was these ostensibly moderate '*petits journaux*' that, building on rising literacy rates, in what was still a predominantly agriculture-centred rural France, that

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<sup>18</sup> *Industry and empire*, London, Pelican, 1968, p.98.

<sup>19</sup> The British newspaper tycoon, Alfred Harmsworth (1865–1922), the future lord Northcliffe, noted in his journal, in 1894, during a visit to Paris, his surprise at the dependence of French popular dailies on the *roman-feuilleton*, or popular serial, which, in a cumbersome pun, he pronounced « fooliton ». Cf. M. Palmer, « Newspapers in Chains; Northcliffe's 'simultaneous newspaper' », *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, Crecib, université de la Sorbonne nouvelle, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> In Britain, the process occurred between 1853 and 1861.

helped awaken a certain political consciousness among those long respectful of a relatively hierarchised rural society<sup>21</sup>.

#### 5. HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO TMEWC?

Thompson studied what was a process lasting at least over a half-century. France industrialized later than Britain and the move from an agriculture-centred economy to an industrial economy took much longer than in Britain<sup>22</sup>. Much of the highly charged political debate in Paris and some other large towns – covered in costly, low-circulation, broadsheet newspapers – had but slight echoes in French towns of, say, under 50 000 or 60 000 inhabitants and in small *communes*; many Frenchmen in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century lived in communities of 2 000 people or less. Thompson on the English working class and many social historians of France suggest ways of detecting how political and class consciousness emerged or intensified. Did British labour transplanted to France help in this process? The railways – the Manby-Wilson Le Creusot firm produced iron rails for the nascent rail-network in France – helped distribute cheap newspapers – mostly Paris-based – nationwide. Many of the large-circulation titles helped acquaint communities with “national issues” rather than help form political consciousness or, indeed, class-consciousness. Some indeed – the highest circulation *Le Petit Journal* (1863-→) included – preached the virtues of a kind of self-help: *aide-toi, le Ciel t’aidera* – rather than fashioning working class-consciousness. The key-word, as exemplified in the titles or masthead of so many popular dailies was “*petit*”: “*les petites gens*” are above all, modest, accepting their lowly lot.

“Bring them back to life”; “put them in context – and define that context”. This is what Thompson was about. Cobb likewise was concerned with the first imperative; less so, perhaps with the second. Thompson, in addition, was a militant – concerned with combatting what, to his generation, was the overriding threat to humanity – nuclear arms. Thompson is still much read and figures on university reading-lists; Cobb less so – despite his masterly *Les armées révolutionnaires*, published in the early 1960s.

#### 6. SOURCES, NEWSPAPERS AND A POLITICISED WORKING CLASS.

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<sup>21</sup> M. Palmer, *Des petits journaux aux grandes agences*, Paris, Aubier, 1983.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ch. Kindlberger, *Economic growth in France and Britain, 1851-1940*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard, 1964; Fr. Crouzet, *De la supériorité de l'Angleterre sur la France. L'économique et l'imaginaire, xvii<sup>e</sup> - xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Plon, 1985

In the postscript dated May 1968 and the final chapter – “class consciousness” – of *TMEWC*, Thompson stresses that

“class is a social and cultural formation...which cannot be defined abstractly or in isolation but only in terms of relationship with other classes;...the definition can only be made in the medium of *time* – that is, action and reaction, change and conflict. When we speak of *a* class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have a *disposition* to *behave* as a class, to define themselves in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is happening”.<sup>23</sup>

In writing thus, Thompson argues both for perceptions of class-formation over time, and pinpoints the notion of “a happening”. The two may seem antagonistic; but they are not.

Furthermore, Thompson marshalls a wide range of source material in arguing his case; the argument itself is that deployed by a historian standing back from the phenomenon or process that he studies. Much of the material on which he calls reflects, as Asa Briggs once put it, “the culture of the self-taught”. Words are artefacts. Much of the language which Thompson and most historians of the people in the periods and countries here under review refer to, was expressed in print or other forms by people who were at least semi-literate. Exercises in oral history cannot help us catch the “distant voices” of early 19<sup>th</sup> century France and Britain. Print media are the prism of predominantly bourgeois perceptions of “the great unwashed”<sup>24</sup>. Thompson calls on words from the articulate self-taught, voiced in print form. He uses, *inter alia*, *the Poor Man’s Guardian*, *the Poor Man’s Advocate*, *the Working Man’s Friend*, *etc*, as well as the bourgeois press. He uses, in short, material from the “unstamped press”: this vector of expression by those who defied the police and other authorities checking illegal “radical”<sup>25</sup> periodicals, attained probably higher circulations in towns such as Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool in the mid-1830s than dailies

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<sup>23</sup> *TMEWC*, p.939.

<sup>24</sup> The term coined by the upper-class Victorian novelist and playwright Edward Bulwer-Lytton in his 1830 novel, *Paul Clifford*, to designate « the common, lower classes or *hoi polloi* ».

<sup>25</sup> In its broadest sense. *The Poor Man’s Guardian* (18 June 1831) argued : « Down with property ». Cf. M. Conboy, *Journalism : a critical history*, London, Sage, 2004, p.105.

paying the stamp duty, such as *The Times*<sup>26</sup>. Thompson consulted some 50 “Jacobin, Radical, trade unionist (and) Owenite” periodicals of the period 1790s-early 1830s<sup>27</sup>. It is in the closing chapters of *TMEWC* that he most quotes these “Radical” publications. But he does so in a subtle manner: “I have tried to distinguish between the experiences of different groups – artisans, outworkers, and labourers – and to show how they were coming to act, think and feel, not in the old mode of deference and parochial seclusion, but in class ways”. This is a delicate exercise: and Thompson, when quoting from unstamped publications and other “Radical” print media largely avoids “blood and thunder, extremist headlin-ese” for a more nuanced view of those who, such as James ‘Bronterre’ O’Brien (1805-64), editor of the *Poor Man’s Guardian*<sup>28</sup>, used such language.

In France as in Britain, these “distant voices” are hard to access, and even harder to interpret. Here, when relating the Manby-Wilson experiment in Franco-British worker “cooperation” or the take-off of “popular newspapers” in France, we are conscious, when looking at labour, of what might be termed ‘distorting mirrors’. Whether this is via contracts and rules and regulations in Le Creusot, or in comments about the popular press – mostly voiced by journalists, most of whom were bourgeois, or by other commentators. As state controls on the press largely lapsed – the symbolic event was the 29 July 1881 press law – it was left to newspaper company archives to sometimes shed light on attitudes of a popular readership; again, the latter includes industrial labour; but if “popular” is to be equated with “les petites gens”, as argued above, then most of this “popular audience” was primarily located in provincial and agricultural France<sup>29</sup>. This is not to deny the importance of the urban and industrial audience, and of socialist, radical-socialist and “extreme-left” publications. But it can justifiably be argued that until the 1880s, the last-mentioned had a limited, albeit vibrant, audience. Three political figures encapsulate, in a way, the problem. Léon Gambetta (1838-82), moved from a position in 1869 as a radical candidate in

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. S. Harrison, *Poor men’s guardians*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1974, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> *TMOEWC*, p.942 .

<sup>28</sup> *TWEWC*, pp .903-5.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *inter alia*, P. Albert, ‘Histoire de la presse périodique nationale au début de la 111<sup>e</sup> République (1871-1879)’, Atelier de reproduction des thèses, 1980, 2 tomes ; F. Amaury, *Histoire du plus grand quotidien de la III<sup>e</sup> République. Le Petit Parisien, 1876-1944*, Paris, P.U.F., 1972, 2 vols.; Cl. Bellanger *et al.*, *Histoire générale de la presse française*, Paris, P.U.F., 1972, t. iii. ; M.Palmer, *Des petits journaux aux grandes agences*, *op.cit.*

opposition to the second empire of the Bonaparte, Louis-Napoleon, to the head of a (short-lived) republican government in 1881-2. In a seminal speech in Grenoble in 1872, he spoke of the advent of new social layers or strata - '*les nouvelles couches sociales*'. But he also spoke of his aversion to the term 'class': he did not want to circumscribe the limits of the bourgeoisie - to whom France owed so much since 1789. Gambetta was the driving-force behind a daily newspaper, *la République française*, launched in 1871, which he saw as the training-ground for those who would exercise power in the republic that was bound to be fully realized in the coming years; it had a 'popular' 5-cms stablemate whose circulation at times exceeded 150 000 copies, but which had a short life. The second figure is Jules Guesde (1845-1922), one of the most effective proselytisers of the writings of Karl Marx in France. He fostered French socialism, especially in northern, industrialized, France. But he never headed a major "popular" newspaper to prove a lasting success. "Popular" dailies at the time in France were capitalist businesses. The socialist daily launched in 1904, *L'Humanité*, of Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) sought to run against this trend; but it, too, long experienced innumerable financial problems - it was more an organ of socialist intellectuals than a popular daily. In France, as in Britain, it was not until the twentieth century that there truly emerged popular dailies in phase with the working class, some of which succeeded in a capitalist context. This is not to deny that the cumulative efforts of generations of successive radical and socialist newspapers and periodicals helped fashion a politicised working-class consciousness. It could also be argued - but this is controversial indeed - that despite Communist<sup>30</sup> and Marxist rhetoric and analyses in terms of the class struggle, "class" was a less potent distinctive feature of 20th century France than in was in Britain.

The expression of working class opinion in the media in 19th century France and Britain is not easy to chart. The filter of the "bourgeois" media is difficult to by-pass. Social historians, media historians, nonetheless try to access working-class news and views. With varying degrees of success. Thompson and Cobb researched periods prior to the advent of mass-circulation newspapers. Their work helps inform those who seek to hear "popular voices" from the past.

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<sup>30</sup> In France, following the socialist-communist split in 1920, *L'Humanité* became the vehicle of the French Communist party.

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