

Contested Space: The Public and Private Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Britain



Anna Clark

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which the common people were deliberately exposed to Calvinist theology is fearfully thin. He admits that the writers' basic purpose was sado-sexual titillation and that their conventional message, that Divine Justice was inexorable and ultimately omnipotent, was far from being exclusively Calvinist or even Protestant. Examples in which they embodied recognizable predestinarian doctrine were rare. Alastair Bellany further explores the literature of the underclass, in the form of the "railing rhymes" against the government which circulated in manuscript or by word of mouth. It is a pity, however, that he focuses on the Duke of Buckingham's assassination in 1628, simply because Buckingham was a sitting duck. It would be more interesting to know what these rhymesters made of less spectacular targets.

However, there is a great deal here to interest any student of the early seventeenth century, and several essays are tactfully and pertinently illustrated. It carries much less dross than many similar volumes which have come my way in recent years.

JOHN KENYON

University of Kansas, Emeritus

EDITOR'S NOTE.—With sadness, the *Journal* wishes to inform its readers that Professor Kenyon died on January 6, 1996.

Contested Space: The Public and Private Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790–1850. By JAMES A. EPSTEIN. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. x + 233.

Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867. By JAMES VERNON. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xviii + 429.

London's Teeming Streets, 1830–1914. By JAMES WINTER. London: Routledge, 1993. Pp. xii + 263.

Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918. By ELLEN ROSS. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Pp. xiii + 308.

Recently, the public sphere has come to substitute for class as a key heuristic concept in current debates about nineteenth-century politics. In the classic notion of the public sphere, rational men met in coffeehouses and clubs to discuss disinterestedly politics and ideas,

but women and working men were seen as too irrational and disorderly to participate in these conversations.¹ The books under consideration challenge this exclusive notion of the public sphere in very different ways. James Epstein and James Vernon depict working people struggling not for control over the means of production but for access to the public sphere and political power. But Epstein and Vernon redeem political history from the maneuverings of elite politicians or dry genealogies of political ideas. Instead, they widen the notion of communication to include signs (both in the semiotic and literal sense), songs, banners, and attire. Together with James Winter, they also envision the public sphere as a concrete place, where people converse and declaim in streets and fields. Ellen Ross takes us from the public into the private world of mothers. While Winter, Epstein, and Vernon not only pay lip service to but contribute insights to gender analysis, Ross takes women's history as her primary focus. She also challenges the division between public and private sphere to demonstrate how state concerns impinged on motherhood by the early twentieth century.

Epstein's *Radical Expression* is a clearly written, richly textured series of studies which explores several facets of early nineteenth-century radicalism. Epstein is especially good at analyzing the complex relations between radical symbolism and the social practice of communities. For instance, women who presented embroidered caps of liberty to leaders on radical platforms often demurely murmured that they would rather shelter in the home than protest in public, but as Epstein points out, their actions in appearing and speaking on public platforms contradicted their deferential protestations of domesticity. Epstein also demonstrates how the cap of liberty, like many other political symbols, resonated with several disparate traditions of radicalism. Although the cap of liberty was associated at the time with the French Revolution, it also had a long heritage connected with English radicalism since 1688.

Dominant among these traditions, as both Epstein and Vernon agree, was constitutionalism. Epstein points out the limitations of the constitutional approach: it could not allow for republican agitation for the abolition of the monarchy; it could not envision socialist redistribution of wealth; and it was a discourse based on masculine notions of citizenship which precluded consideration of women's rights. The notion of the public sphere envisioned by conventional constitutionalists, furthermore, excluded working men. For instance, when T. J. Wooler was tried for seditious and blasphemous libel, Attorney General Samuel Shepherd denied Wooler's claim to have freedom of speech as a

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (1962; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p. 173; Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 45.

public writer because he was not fit for the elevated sphere of public opinion. While Wooler cited constitutional arguments in his defense, he also ridiculed the constitution as a farce which could not protect working men's liberties. In response to these limitations, plebeian radicals developed an alternative public sphere, not only through mass meetings, but in rituals such as dining and toasting.

Yet Epstein and Vernon both agree that constitutionalism provided a powerful narrative which resonated with the traditions and communities of working-class people, while, as Vernon suggests, Paineite rationalism was less accessible because it was based on abstract principles. Similarly, Epstein shows that the rational republicanism of Richard Carlile never had the popular success of Henry Hunt's flamboyant interpretation of constitutionalism. Of course, as both authors emphasize, radicals also *had* to argue within the constitutionalist tradition because it was backed up by state power.

Epstein, unlike Vernon, keeps the notion of class firmly in the forefront as he analyzes constitutionalist radicalism. Part of the difference of opinion here, of course, lies in the fact that Epstein is discussing the first half of the nineteenth century, when openly expressed class conflict was quite acute. Nonetheless, Epstein cuts the Gordian knot of debate about class consciousness. Accepting that nineteenth-century British working people did not exhibit class consciousness in Marxist terms, he simply proposes that class conflict was carried out in the shared code of constitutionalist debate. A political definition of class is certainly more useful than one defined by the mode of production, since after all, the 1832 Reform Act very clearly drew the line between the middle and the working classes, and the 1867 Reform Act debates centered around the need to represent the "working classes." However, Epstein's book lacks a conclusion, which might have looked forward to the later period when class conflict was redefined—or defined out of existence—in quite new ways.

By the 1850s and 1860s, as Vernon argues, Liberals and Conservatives attempted to redefine the People as middle- and working-class people together and to depict the Nation united in a common interest.² Vernon prefers to discuss working people's responses to these efforts as "populist" rather than class-based. For Vernon, like Patrick Joyce, the word "class" is still too bogged down with Marxist baggage, and he prefers populism. However, "populism" is a somewhat anachronistic and American term, whereas "class" was used by the Victorians themselves. Surely, it is better to analyze the many ways nineteenth-century British people used "class," rather than to avoid the term or beat the dead horse of Marxist class consciousness. Indeed, Vernon

² See also Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848–1874* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 189.

ultimately concludes that “we really do not have to, and cannot chose between class and populism” (p. 330).³

Vernon’s *Politics and the People* brings together two strands of historiography which are usually separate from each other: the history of working-class protest and the history of constitutionalism and high politics. While social historians have long explored the symbolic, festive, communal aspects of working-class political protest, they have, with notable exceptions, rarely linked them with high politics.⁴ And conventional political history usually disdains to consider working-class protest within its purview. Vernon’s chief insights lay in the way he expands the definition of the public sphere—and also where politics take place—beyond Parliament and London clubs. Even the disenfranchised had been able to participate in politics by huzzahing at the hustings, chairing candidates, and booing unsuccessful nominees. Vernon demonstrates how civic landscapes and ritual also incorporated the unenfranchised into the political sphere, for they could wave flags even if they could not vote.

Vernon asserts, however, that the political reforms of this period actually “clos[ed] democratic political forms, [and] stiff[ed] a radical libertarian tradition” (p. 7). He proposes, following Frank O’Gorman, that the pre-1832 electorate was already diverse and expanding.⁵ The 1832 Reform Act excluded those few working men who enjoyed an anomalous franchise and for the first time, as Vernon points out, defined the citizen as male. Vernon’s commendable attention to gender could be further expanded by analyzing how constitutionalism limited radical aspirations by defining the citizen not only as male, but as a particular kind of man, a propertied head of household, not a working man or a bachelor lodger.

Vernon sees efforts to suppress the boisterous, public nature of the hustings, and to replace street literature with a legitimate press, as efforts to drive politics away from the democratic chaos of the streets into the respectable quiet of the home. He argues that the “Ballot Act did not herald a new democratic era where individual opinion triumphed over the politics of influence and corruption. Instead it heralded the closing down of the public political sphere [of the hustings] by officials who sought to replace the public and collective experience with an increased private and male one” (p. 158).

There are three problems with this intriguing argument, some of which Vernon implicitly recognizes. First, Vernon himself admits he

³ Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 27.

⁴ For a notable exception, see John Brewer, “Theater and Counter-theater in Georgian Politics: The Mock Elections at Garrat,” *Radical History Review* 22 (1979–80): 7–40.

⁵ Frank O’Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

is enthralled with melodrama; and who can blame him, for he is not the only historian to be enticed by this genre.⁶ His main thesis therefore structures the book around a melodramatic narrative of a fall from a golden age, “celebrat[ing] all that was local, popular, feminine, fluid and open as opposed to the denigration of all that was national, official, masculine, static, and closed.” Vernon therefore essentializes the feminine and romanticizes the popular.

Second, efforts to close down or limit the public sphere were not particularly successful. Indeed, as a good poststructuralist, Vernon also excels at demonstrating how narratives provide a false sense of closure, and in fact, are constantly fractured. By depicting working people’s manipulation of constitutionalism to their own ends, Vernon brilliantly undermines his own narrative of the contraction of the public sphere. Vernon demonstrates that working people themselves fought hard for freedom of the press and the ballot act, preferring them to crude, illicit handbills and the hustings.

Third, the efforts by politicians to rationalize and restrict the public sphere could be seen as, in part, an effort to prevent the growth of class consciousness. Indeed, nineteenth-century constitutionalist Walter Bagehot feared that enfranchising working men on the grounds of their class interest would ignite dangerous “democratic passions,” whereas granting the vote to them as individual heads of household, he hoped, would make them more deferential to aristocratic influence.⁷ The effort to redefine the public sphere into the consensus politics of the 1860s and 1870s successfully co-opted respectable working men, but the constitutionalist paradigm does not help us understand the new forms of radicalism of the 1880s on into the twentieth century.⁸

Coming down from the sphere of constitutional struggles literally into the streets, Winter shows us how some of these debates over the constitutional right to liberty versus the power of the state were played out in the public spaces of London. As he points out, the freedom of the streets was more basic to English citizens, and more widely available, than the right to vote. For instance, working people asserted

⁶ For examples, see Anna Clark, “The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language and Class in the 1830s and 1840s,” *Journal of British Studies* 31, no. 1 (1992): 62–88; Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 85–131.

⁷ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (1872; reprint, New York and London: Garland, 1978), p. xxx.

⁸ The collection *Currents of Radicalism* illuminates this problem to some extent (ed. Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair Reid [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991]): on continuity, see John Shepherd, “Labour and Parliament: The Lib.-Labs as the First Working-Class MPs, 1885–1906” (pp. 187–213), and Alastair J. Reid, “Old Unionism Reconsidered: The Radicalism of Robert Knight, 1870–1900” (pp. 214–43), and on the new ideas, see Duncan Tanner, “Ideological Debate in Edwardian Labour Politics: Radicalism, Revisionism and Socialism” (pp. 271–83).

popular sovereignty when they met in Hyde Park for great reform demonstrations.⁹

Winter's book on London streets enlivens a potentially dry topic in administrative urban history with a fascinating narrative enriched with the insights of social history. The streets were not mere conduits for traffic, they were sites of culture—brass musicians blaring, women marketing, men spilling out from pubs, costermongers selling fruit, balladmongers singing tales. To many rationalist Benthamite and other reformers, however, London's vibrant chaos seemed dangerous, dirty, and obstructive. They wanted the smooth flow of traffic rather than potentially dangerous assemblages of working-class people. In 1866, for instance, engineer John Peak Knight invented a traffic signal, which Winter wittily depicts as exemplifying "high Victorian exuberance," piling gilded acanthus leaves and a pineapple finial atop gothic paneling. Unfortunately, a leaky gas main exploded the signal in 1869, and the full introduction of traffic signals was delayed until 1929. The story of the failed traffic signal is emblematic of Winter's larger theme: the tension between the liberty of the streets and reformers' efforts to regulate city life. Winter goes beyond previous paradigms of heavy-handed state regulation versus working-class resistance to point out that regulation failed more often than not. Because reformers had to accommodate themselves to political realities and working-class wishes, they could not push through a comprehensive London street plan or traffic control. Winters nicely delineates the interplay between reformers such as Octavia Hill, who wished the working class off the gritty streets, and local working-class people, who demanded public parks with sports facilities, bands, and soapbox corners.

Winter commendably highlights the importance of gender in defining public and private space. "Respectable women," for instance, could promenade Regent Street by day to window-shop, but they were warned to stay off at night, when it became the territory of prostitutes and their customers. An examination of the changing culture of prostitutes on London streets would have been an interesting complement to Winter's discussion of sexual harassment.

Instead of concentrating on the texture of working-class life on the streets, however, Winter focuses on individual reformers, their successes, and more often, intriguing anecdotes about their failures. For instance, Charles Cochrane, a former minstrel, vestryman, and gadfly of local politics, protested wage cuts for paupers cutting paving stones by dumping a load of gravel in a parish vestry hall. However, the thwarted "great man" approach has its limitations. For instance, in his chapter on the police, Winters argues that police commissioners Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne did not want heavy-handed polic-

⁹ Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment, and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 302.

ing and surveillance of working-class communities but relies on parliamentary reports and letters instead of working-class newspaper accounts of police activities, which would present quite a different story.

Ross's *Love and Toil*, in contrast, draws its strength from her ability to look at working-class culture from the inside, not just from the point of view of the reformers. Ross avoids romanticizing the working-class experience and wisely refuses to assume that men's and women's interests were the same. For instance, she asserts that the "family was not a bulwark against capitalist wage labor" (p. 8). In fact, London husbands termed the housekeeping money they gave their wives a "wage," and it was often inadequate, at that. Mothers starved themselves in order to provide meat to the breadwinner and bread to the children. When men went away to fight and die in World War I, their wives received all their husbands' wage packets, and as a result, maternal and child health improved dramatically.

Ross's mosaic of motherly tasks represents a sophisticated version of social history inspired by E. P. Thompson's humanism and enriched with anthropological analysis, while grounded in material life. She shows us that the existence of the working class was not just a political projection, but a lived experience. For instance, working-class women had widely different assumptions about motherhood than did their upper-class counterparts. Upper-class women were increasingly focused on a highly regulated, intensive nurturance of their children through scheduled feedings, individual attention to education, and intense self-control. They often tried to impose these cultural assumptions on working-class women through philanthropy and social work. Working-class mothers, however, expressed their love by *working* for their children, keeping them clothed, clean and fed, and expecting their wages and care in return.

Ross demonstrates, continuing two decades' worth of feminist historiographical insights to which she has frequently contributed, that the private sphere of the home was actually permeated by public political concerns. In fact, with universal elementary education and increased eugenic concern with infant mortality, state control over motherhood intensified, as the government passed acts mandating greater responsibility for mothers without providing any resources. Ross borrows from the Foucauldian paradigm to track these interventions, but she also transcends it by demonstrating how working-class mothers negotiated and resisted regulation. They refused to schedule feedings, preferring to cuddle, and therefore quiet, crying infants. Yet larger social forces also transformed the family, as twentieth-century mothers began to enter waged work more and bear fewer children.

Ross's book could also be used to demonstrate the limitations of the constitutionalist paradigm by the turn of the century. Although many working men accepted constitutionalism and a modified version of political economy through the 1890s, we still need to be able to

understand the changes in politics to encompass issues of welfare and maternal and child health, issues which lay outside the constitution's parameters—as well as outside classic socialist paradigms.¹⁰

All four books under consideration advance social and political history by refusing to accept determinism. Instead of portraying working people as the pawns of impersonal forces, whether capitalism or constitutionalism, they restore their agency as historical actors. Working people continually negotiated and struggled over political power, over rhetoric, over urban space, over child rearing, even if, as Epstein observes, these struggles were carried out within the constraints of a “shared code” of meaning.

ANNA CLARK

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

¹⁰ For useful discussions of this problem which transcend the old paradigm, see Pat Thane, “Labour and Local Politics: Radicalism, Democracy, and Social Reform,” in Biagini and Reid, eds.; and Jane Lawson, Mike Savage, and A. Warde, “Gender and Local Politics: Struggles over Welfare Policies,” in *Localities, Class and Gender*, ed. L. Murgatroyd et al. (Oxford: Polity, 1985), pp. 195–217.