

# The factory question and industrial England, 1830–1860

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## Introduction

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The factory, the forge and the pithead do not nowadays cast quite such a long shadow over the historiography of nineteenth-century British society. Industrialisation and class are familiar themes in British social history, but they have also to some extent become unfashionable ones, with revisionist historiographies of economic growth, the apparently diminished impact of industry and a general emphasis on gradualism and continuity, in social and cultural as well as economic terms.<sup>1</sup> The argument of this book begins from the assumption that, whatever the net contribution of industry to the longer-run growth of Britain's economy or to the social identities of Britain's peoples, the nineteenth century was marked by changes in employment relations and working lives. There was a process of invention, not just of machines, but of ways of life understood as 'industrial'. The formation of cultures of industrial work remains an important part of British historical experience. Capital, labour, work, wages, consumption – the very categories of economics and economic history – were themselves products of cultural changes.<sup>2</sup> In this book I explore the making of these contested meanings.

Industrialisation has to be considered as a cultural transformation. My argument is in part a critical response to recent historiography. A powerful trend in economic history has downplayed the 'industrial revolution'. Economic growth has been seen as more modest than had been supposed; while the role within this of factory-based production, or other

<sup>1</sup> See esp. N.F.R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1985); R. Floud and D. McCloskey (eds.), *The Economic History of Britain since 1700* (Cambridge, 1981). It should be emphasised that debates on these topics are partly a matter of emphasis; for a critical overview, P. Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992). An important recent interpretation emphasising continuities centred on 'gentlemanly capitalism', empire, finance and the service sector is P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (Harlow, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> For the cultural construction of waged work, see, e.g., P. Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge, 1987); W.R. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture: The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750–1900* (Cambridge, 1984).

new technologies, has been similarly qualified.<sup>3</sup> In social and political terms, it is suggested that essentially 'pre-industrial' elites retained their dominance, while the expansion of the 'middle classes' showed similar characteristics, based not predominantly in industrial entrepreneurship, but in commerce, services and opportunities created by largely independent processes of urban growth.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the story of popular protest was less the making of any particular class than a series of localised protests, contingently unified by a consciousness of political exclusion. This politically defined conflict has been argued to be prior to, and independent of, the social relations of industrial capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

Industrialisation and class, and the break represented by the 'industrial revolution' have thus become less distinct. The once-powerful figures of the 'new' industrial entrepreneur and the 'new' industrial worker have been lost in a larger and more crowded panorama of British society, peopled by aristocracy, 'gentlemanly capitalists' and allied professional elites at the top, plebeian classes beneath; privatised and aspirant middle classes are uneasily poised, precisely, somewhere in the middle. There are, of course, some factory chimneys somewhere in the picture, but they are less prominent than in earlier pictures.

The present study once more gives prominence to the factory, industrial employers and industrial workers. These are seen as important, not only in themselves, but in the way their activities and aspirations impinged on other groups, forming the material of social debates, occasional political intervention and continued philanthropic *angst*. In giving renewed attention to these issues, I have no wish to reinstate a teleological reduction of everything else to an effect of industrialisation and class. The first half of the nineteenth century was marked by transformations in a number of spheres. Indeed part of my purpose is to investigate how ideas and cultural forms derived from diverse sources influenced relations and identities in industry itself.

<sup>3</sup> See works cited above, n. 1; for a discussion of uneven development and the labour process, P. Joyce, 'Work', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 1990), vol. II.

<sup>4</sup> Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*. For studies of the middle class in industrial regions, S. Gunn, 'The Manchester middle class, 1850–1880', PhD, University of Manchester, 1992; T. Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban Industrial Society: Bradford 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1990); R.J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds, 1820–1850* (Manchester, 1990); J. Smail, 'The origins of middle-class culture in Halifax', paper at symposium on 'Conflict and Change in English Communities and Regions', University of Liverpool, 1995; R.H. Trainor, *Black Country Elites: The Exercise of Authority in an Industrial Area, 1830–1900* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> E.F. Biagini and A.R. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983).

This cultural perspective leads back to some of the 'traditional' themes of the industrial revolution. As recent critics have pointed out, the term 'industrial revolution' is used in varied senses.<sup>6</sup> It may indicate acceleration of economic growth; the specific impact of new technologies and forms of work organisation, such as the factory; or a series of wider economic, social and cultural changes, roughly equivalent to some notion of 'modernisation'. It may also indicate social problems thought to be associated with some or all of these processes. Contemporary, or near-contemporary views often elided these definitions into some grand sweep of historical change, regarded with varying degrees of enthusiasm or apprehension. Innovations in communication, including new printing techniques and new media as well as transport methods, were among the ways this impinged on people not directly engaged in industrial production. It is neatly captured in Peacock's satire on 'steam intellect'.<sup>7</sup>

The focus on the machine and on the steam-engine as prime movers and regulators of the industrial process was a powerful one. Perhaps in keeping with the 'spirit of the age', it provided (and to some extent continues to provide) a technicist explanation for complex social changes. As recent scholarship has emphasised, key regions of rapid industrialisation were by no means confined to factory-based industries, but also included the expansion and intensification of workshop and domestic production. Here, and equally within the factory itself, changes in the organisation of work and the sub-divisions of labour were as important as machinery. As research on the labour process, in Britain and elsewhere, has indicated, the factory was simply one form of a wider disciplining and intensification of labour. 'Productivist pressure', with or without the aid of machinery, was common to factory, workshop and domestic industrial locations.<sup>8</sup> But the factory (together with other

<sup>6</sup> J. Goodman and K. Honeyman, *Gainful Pursuits: The Making of Industrial Europe 1600–1914* (London, 1988), pp. 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, as quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Pelican edn, Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 805; see also H. Jennings, *Pandemonium: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers* (Pan edn, London, 1987), for perceptions of technological change; G.N. von Tunzelmann, *Steam-Power and British Industrialisation to 1860* (Oxford, 1978), for an economic analysis of the uneven and less than spectacular achievements of the steam-engine.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Cottureau, 'The distinctiveness of working-class cultures in France', in I. Katznelson and A.R. Zolberg (eds.), *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 121–3. On change in British workshop trades see C. Behagg, *Politics and Production in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1990); M. Berg, *The Age of Manufactures, 1700–1820* (London, 1985); as Landes has recently pointed out, 'revisionist' writers often exaggerate the stagnation of non-factory sectors: D.S. Landes, 'The fable of the dead horse; or, the industrial revolution revisited', in J. Mokyr (ed.), *The British Industrial Revolution: an Economic Perspective* (Boulder, Colo., and Oxford, 1993), pp. 156–7, note.

glamorous applications of steam-power, notably to transport) came to stand as a potent symbol of industrial change, whether viewed as improvement, immiseration or some ambivalent mixture of the two. While the role of the factory and the machine were exaggerated and mythologised, they were also, as Pat Hudson has argued, ‘symbolic of so many other changes attendant on the emergence of a more competitive market environment and the greater disciplining and alienation of labour’.<sup>9</sup> Downward revision of estimated industrial growth and the undoubtedly narrow base of the factory sector would, if anything, make this cultural imagery of modern industry all the more deserving of historical analysis. The very limitations of industrial productivity required greater numbers of workers, and in that respect could actually *increase* the social impact of industrialism. If images of ‘industrial revolution’ sometimes reduce diverse processes to the remorseless expansion of mechanised factory production, the origins of this elision remain worthy of study.

There are a number of reasons for continuing to see what contemporaries often called the ‘factory system’ as a significant development in early and mid-nineteenth-century Britain. The economic weight attached to the industrial sector is a matter of continuing debate, and it is certainly as well to resist any hardening of recent revisions into neo-orthodoxy. The case has been well argued by Pat Hudson, who suggests that structural transformations might not be expressed directly in increased growth-rates, but nevertheless establish preconditions of later growth; the periods of most dramatic change (and disturbance) are not necessarily the periods of most rapid growth in quantitative terms. She also draws attention to the relevance of specific regional experiences of concentrated industrial and urban growth, which may justify much of the ‘traditional’ emphasis on a dramatic – or even, in some respects, a catastrophic – transformation.<sup>10</sup>

Such unique regional experiences of industrial and urban expansion and change provide the framework of this study. I focus on the ‘factory districts’ of Lancashire and the West Riding, and on the development there of conflicts over work conditions and employment practices, which were expressed in attempts to impose regulated working hours. The debates associated with these struggles extended into changing definitions of the nature of work, the claims and limits of the employment contract and of employers’ authority.

What was often referred to as the ‘factory question’ focused attention on problems and conflicts associated with concentrated regional experi-

<sup>9</sup> Hudson, *Industrial Revolution*, p. 218.    <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. ch. 4.

ences of rapid industrialisation. It was in the shape of this 'question' that such experiences impinged most often on public debate. The early 1830s saw the emergence of a popular short-time movement demanding a regulated ten-hour day for juvenile workers, and latterly for adult women; this was implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, envisaged as extending in practice to adult men. The ensuing struggles and debates provide the organising theme of this book. This has been extensively treated, from a variety of viewpoints, and some brief comments on the existing scholarship may bring out more clearly the distinctive approach of this book.

The factory acts constitute a classic case-study in state intervention in the framework of economic and political liberalism. Among the issues raised were the definition of market relations and their individual agents, the appropriate boundaries (whether legal, customary or moral) of employment contracts, the stabilisation of the family, education and the reproduction of wage-labour. This was expressed in reinterpretations of political economy, for example in J.S. Mill's celebrated codification of the permissible exceptions to the rule of non-interference, as well as in arguments on 'higher than commercial grounds' about endangered childhoods, physical and moral deterioration and the need to reconstitute a properly ordered family life. These debates have long preoccupied economists and historians of economic thought, notably in A.P. Robson's valuable study of the forging of a new policy synthesis incorporating factory regulation along with free trade.<sup>11</sup> More recently, 'neo-liberal' interpretations have suggested that the ameliorative effect of legislation at best gave marginal reinforcement to the benign processes of an expanding market economy, in which more efficient labour markets produced preferences for fitter and better educated workers. At worst, legislation represented the levying of monopolistic quasi-rents by skilled workers in collusion with those employers who were advantaged by lower compliance costs.<sup>12</sup> These issues have perhaps acquired renewed topicality with the current trend, in Britain and elsewhere, towards the de-regulation of markets.

Marx, in his prolonged critical dialogue with political economy, took up the themes of 'human capital' and industrial efficiency, as well as the image of the large factory as the exemplar of rationalised, disciplined labour. The detailed regulations of hours and working arrangements 'by the stroke of the clock' were 'by no means a product of the fantasy of Members of Parliament. They developed gradually out of circumstances

<sup>11</sup> A.P. Robson, *On Higher than Commercial Grounds: The Factory Controversy, 1830-1853* (New York and London, 1985); see also A.W. Coats (ed.), *The Classical Economists and Economic Policy* (London, 1971).

<sup>12</sup> C. Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990). I comment further on de-regulation in the conclusion to this book.

as natural laws of the modern mode of production.’ There is however some tension in Marx’s account between these inherent requirements of modern industry and the moment of class struggle, which brought about their ‘formulation, official recognition and proclamation by the State’.<sup>13</sup> Marx seems to have seen working-class pressure and state intervention as countervailing forces, which imposed discipline on individual capitals in the ultimate interest of capitalism as a system. These comments have been much discussed and elaborated in more recent theoretical writings about the capitalist state (though that discussion sometimes seems to proceed on the odd assumption that an acquaintance with the text of *Capital* is a sufficient encounter with the real history Marx was trying to comprehend).<sup>14</sup> The impact of legislation on the labour process and on the social reproduction of labour-power is among the important issues raised in Marx’s analysis, and I have taken it up in the present work.

The historiography of factory reform has perhaps been most strongly influenced by late Victorian and Edwardian perspectives, which retained their influence down to the extension of the ‘welfare state’ after 1945. These views were shaped by the context of political democratisation, the growth of labour politics, the expansion of the national and local state and debates surrounding ‘collectivism’. Of varying political persuasions, these accounts have in common a somewhat Whiggish view of constitutional progress and social evolution, which achieved some rational control over the chaos of economic and social change and the excesses of *laissez-faire*. As the Hammonds confidently asserted: ‘the English people began to devise constructive institutions, such as the Civil Service, the Trade Unions, and the system of Factory Law’.<sup>15</sup> Successive extensions and consolidations of legislation, from its initial application to textile factories, could be readily placed in a perspective of gradualist progress. Within this, differing importance might be attached to working-class pressure (the Hammonds’ ‘trade unions’), the administrative zeal of officials and politicians (‘the civil service’ and the ‘system of factory law’) or to an enlightened public opinion.<sup>16</sup>

Views of factory regulation as part of a broad-based enlightened consensus can in fact be traced back to the immediate aftermath of the battles of the 1830s and 40s; the benefits of legislation came to form part of a

<sup>13</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (Pelican edn, Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 394–5.

<sup>14</sup> B. Jessop, *The Capitalist State* (Oxford, 1982); for an analytic inventory of Marx’s and Engels’ own views, see P. Phillips, *Marx and Engels on Law and Laws* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> J.L. Hammond and B. Hammond, *The Rise of Modern Industry* (6th edn, London, 1946; orig. edn 1925), p. x. Cf., e.g., J. Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden* (10th edn, 1903), p. 303, and the views of Alfred Marshall, quoted by Nardinelli, *Child Labor*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> B.L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation* (3rd edn, London, 1926); M.W. Thomas, *The Early Factory Legislation* (Leigh-on-Sea, 1947).

conventional wisdom in the rhetoric of workers' representatives, prominent employers and politicians across a spectrum of opinion. The construction of this view, with its ambiguities and its silences, will be one problem addressed in this study (see especially chapter 8 below). Within this framework, Tory–Evangelical influences have often been singled out for emphasis in historical retrospect. There has been a particular focus on the role of Lord Ashley (subsequently Lord Shaftesbury), that mid-Victorian icon of patrician Christian benevolence. This can also be linked to a wider social interpretation, emphasising the landed gentry as a counterweight to industrial capital, taking opportunistic 'revenge' for the repeal of the corn laws, but also acting as bearers of a more deeply rooted ethic of social responsibility. In addition to the role of Ashley, this interpretation rests on the flamboyant Tory populism of Richard Oastler, and the activities of G.S. Bull and a few other Anglican clerics.<sup>17</sup> The links between Toryism and factory reform have been reinforced by the creation of 'retrospective Tories' from certain local radical activists who subsequently aligned with the Tories, with the decline of Chartism and the squeezing of the space for an independent radicalism.<sup>18</sup>

The 'Tory–Radical alliance' for factory reform may thus be in large measure a retrospective construct. Recent studies have placed more emphasis on the popular radical elements in short-time activity, its base in working-class organisations and links to Chartism.<sup>19</sup> Propertied advocates of the ten-hours bill included independent radicals like Fielden, functioning as parliamentary spokesmen for popular radicalism, and to some extent for Chartism. Fielden's death rendered him unavailable for reconstruction as a 'retrospective Tory' (though his family did follow this kind of trajectory); but, as Stuart Weaver has argued, Fielden's politics belonged as much to the radical edge of Liberal Dissent, as to some incipient Tory populism.<sup>20</sup> In recent scholarship the factory movement has appeared more clearly as an episode in the making of the working

<sup>17</sup> See J.T. Ward, *The Factory Movement, 1830–1855* (London, 1962). On key figures, C. Driver, *Tory Radical: The Life of Richard Oastler* (New York, 1946), remains indispensable; G.B.A.M. Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury* (London, 1981), is the most recent scholarly biography, earlier studies include one by the Hammonds; B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism upon Social Thought, 1785–1865* (paperback edn, Oxford, 1991), for an important reappraisal of evangelical thought, as well as of many other themes relevant to this study.

<sup>18</sup> J.R. Saunders, 'Working-class movements in the West Riding textile district, 1829–1839', PhD, University of Manchester, 1984, pp. 360–1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 5; R.A. Sykes, 'Popular politics and trade unionism in south-east Lancashire, 1829–44', PhD, University of Manchester, 1982, pp. 425–37; S.A. Weaver, 'The political ideology of short-time', in G. Cross (ed.), *Worktime and Industrialization: An International History* (Philadelphia, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> S.A. Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism, 1832–1847* (Oxford, 1987).

class. I certainly see it in that way myself. But I have also tried to take seriously the frequent cross-class appeals of its rhetoric, and to explore the construction of wider alliances, whether with Tory or Liberal elites. I would argue that gender, patriarchy and languages of 'patriarchal protection' were important dimensions of this process.

Feminist perspectives have drawn attention to the patriarchal, as well as class, interests involved in reshaping divisions of labour and labour processes. 'Protective legislation', of which the early factory acts were a key instance, has been viewed in this light.<sup>21</sup> The regulation of women's employment is seen as reinforcing job segregation and their marginalisation in the 'public' sphere of the formal economy. Short-time agitation helped construct the 'male breadwinner' ideology, in which the Evangelical values of patrician reformers like Ashley converged with the exclusionist interests of male workers. The much-discussed social settlement of the mid-century then appears as a negotiated collusion of organised male workers, employers and the state to subordinate and exploit working-class women.

Contemporaries and some of the earlier historians were aware of this dimension, although they also noted the tactical use of protected workers as stalking-horses, in campaigns 'really' aimed at shorter hours for the men.<sup>22</sup> Such tactics would seem to undermine the logic of excluding women from factory work altogether. This apparent contradiction indicates the importance of looking closely at the construction of gender and class in specific contexts, and taking account of varying practical implications. Pervasive concerns, across class divides, to restabilise a form of patriarchal nuclear family did not necessarily lead to coherent or consistent strategies or programmes. The most extensively discussed case is that of the 1842 Mines Act, and this does not necessarily provide an appropriate model for the factory acts, which were themselves variable in their significance.<sup>23</sup> The debate on the Mines Act does, however, provide a very important model in its attention to the complexity of alliances around class and gender issues, and to regional and local variations. Finally, fem-

<sup>21</sup> W. Secombe, 'Patriarchy stabilised: the construction of the male breadwinner norm in nineteenth-century Britain', *Social History* 11 (1986); M. Valverde, "'Giving the female a domestic turn": the social, legal and moral regulation of women's work in British cotton mills, 1830-1850', *Journal of Social History* 21 (1988); S. Walby, *Patriarchy at Work* (Cambridge, 1986); and *Social History* 13 (1988), thematic issue on 'gender and employment'.

<sup>22</sup> Hutchins and Harrison, *History of Factory Legislation*, pp. 65-6, 109-110.

<sup>23</sup> A.V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (paperback edn, London, 1984); J. Humphries, 'Protective legislation, the capitalist state and working class men: the case of the 1842 Mines Regulation Act', *Feminist Review* no. 7 (spring 1981), and subsequent debate, *ibid.* no. 9 (autumn 1981).

inist work has indicated the importance of taking languages of social enquiry and intervention seriously; for men and for women, a patriarchal rhetoric was, after all, part of the *substance* of the matter. My emphasis on the varied, sometimes incoherent, practical effects of such rhetoric should not be taken to imply that it is irrelevant, or the simple epiphenomenon of a struggle whose essential meaning is to be sought at the level of class analysis.

This study will therefore examine the variable and contested meanings of the factory question, and the construction of these meanings in specific contexts, in both time and space. I argue that this is related to the wider construction of 'industrial England' as a functioning society, marked by particular patterns of social difference and conflict.

I have also set out to examine factory regulation as an episode in the formation of the early and mid-Victorian 'liberal state', and of the imagined imperial Britain, in which industrial England occupied an important place. Historians have long debated the nature of the Victorian state and the respective contributions to it of Benthamism, Tory paternalism, Evangelical zeal and administrative pragmatism.<sup>24</sup> More recently, Mandler's important study has sought to recover the active contributions of a specifically Whig aristocratic paternalism and interventionism.<sup>25</sup> One issue is that of continuity and change in governing elites. The continued aristocratic presence at the political centre, and in much of the administrative state, might reinforce a thesis of 'gentlemanly capitalism' and the limited impact of industry.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, attention has also been drawn to the role of key individuals identified with rationalising liberal reform, and linked to middle-class networks in manufacturing towns.<sup>27</sup> Such figures are perhaps best defined in terms of their rather precarious claims to professionalism.

The extent to which these professionalised intellectuals were enabled to take agenda-setting initiatives is one important issue in the analysis of state formation. Factory regulation provides an illuminating case-study.

<sup>24</sup> See esp. P. Corrigan (ed.), *Capitalism, State Formation and Marxist Theory* (London, 1980); O. MacDonagh, 'The nineteenth-century revolution in government: a reappraisal', *Historical Journal* 1 (1958); H. Parris, *Constitutional Bureaucracy* (London, 1969); D. Roberts, *Victorian Origins of the Welfare State* (New Haven, 1960); G. Sutherland (ed.), *Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-Century Government* (London, 1972).

<sup>25</sup> P. Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> See Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, esp. ch. 3, for a recent interpretative synthesis along these lines.

<sup>27</sup> R. Johnson, 'Educating the educators: educational experts and the state, 1833–1839', in A.P. Donajgrodzki (ed.), *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1977); F. Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities* (London, 1987).

Continued organised pressure, from both employers and workers and their allies, and considerable sensitivity about intervention in labour markets and the workplace, made the issue a thorny one. From the Factory Commission of 1833 onwards, it also provided one sphere of activity for an identifiable group of liberal ‘experts’, who attempted, with mixed results, to articulate versions of factory reform inflected by their own agendas (especially regarding education). Factory regulation thus exemplifies both the appropriation and partial redefinition of a social issue by a network of intellectuals, and the other forces which limited their practical influence. Socio-legal studies of factory act enforcement have made illuminating contributions here, raising issues about the practical reach of official schemes of reform and the redefinition of agendas through conflict and bargaining.<sup>28</sup>

Concerns with language are relevant to these problems of class, gender and state formation. The ‘linguistic turn’ in social history forms part of the context of this work. The short-time movement has an obvious bearing on ‘languages of class’.<sup>29</sup> I shall give sustained attention to languages of radical constitutionalism and popular evangelicalism (of the Methodist, rather than patrician Anglican variety). Both of these combined an address to working-class people with cross-class moralising appeals. The factory movement is of particular interest for the mobilisation of such languages to address employment relations. Radicalism and evangelicalism were also of course gendered languages, and I investigate the complex and often ambiguous positioning of class and gender in ten-hours rhetoric. Finally, it will be necessary to consider the relationship of popular rhetorics to other, less confrontational languages of reform – whether of patrician Evangelical, enlightened Whig or Benthamite derivation – and to the pressure of the state and its agents in establishing a preferred language of public debate. This, too, is to be seen as a complex process, as the site of contestation and renegotiation rather than as the imposition of a single, all-encompassing authoritative discourse.

A range of discourses influenced people’s understandings of industrial change. Sermons, journalism, medical tracts and various fictions have to be read alongside the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary speeches, offi-

<sup>28</sup> P. Bartrip and P. Fenn, ‘The evolution of regulatory style in the nineteenth-century British factory inspectorate’, *Journal of Law and Society* 10 (1983); W.G. Carson, ‘The conventionalization of early factory crime’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 7 (1979); S. Field, ‘Without the law?: professor Arthurs and the early factory inspectorate’, *Journal of Law and Society* 17, no. 4 (1990), pp. 445–68.

<sup>29</sup> Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*; see also J.W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York and Oxford, 1988). Weaver, ‘Political ideology of short-time’ emphasises the radical language of working-class short-time activism.

cial reports, pamphlets and placards that more directly addressed the factory question. I have tried to identify the inter-textualities involved in this range of cultural representations, and the appropriation and transformation of language and metaphor. In charting such shifts, it is important to pay close attention to the adaptation of language in different contexts, to consider language use and language users, as well as the formal characteristics of particular discourses. The cultural competences of different publics affected the possibilities of appropriation. It is worth noting that, for working-class publics, these competences were by no means inconsiderable.<sup>30</sup> It is also important to realise that the available evidence, especially regarding popular political and cultural expression, constitutes a series of fragmentary traces of a wider linguistic field. The popular meanings of the factory question were, for example, conveyed in the visual imagery of banners, none of which survive (though descriptions of them do).<sup>31</sup>

Attempts to establish specific discourses as preferred ways of talking about particular topics involved an anxious policing of the boundaries, and rarely went uncontested. This policing is to be seen, for example, in the concern of less outspoken reformers to dissociate their views from the 'excessive' language of popular figures like Richard Oastler. There are some grounds for regarding the second quarter of the nineteenth century as a period of some cultural uncertainty, when discursive hierarchies were unsettled and open to challenge. The years around the mid-century, on the other hand, show signs of a process of greater settlement. In this sense, it is possible to adduce cultural evidence for the much-debated thesis of a mid-century diminution in social conflicts. As Samuel Kydd put it in his near-contemporary account of the factory movement: 'It is just possible that the principal actors in the stirring scenes of these times were they now to read their own speeches, as then reported, would do so with astonishment.'<sup>32</sup> This shift should not, however, be taken to imply

<sup>30</sup> Cf. S. Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London, 1994), 'Introduction'. On nineteenth-century working-class cultural competences, esp. B. Maidment (ed.), *The Poorhouse Fugitives* (paperback edn, Manchester, 1992); C. Steedman, *The Radical Soldier's Tale: John Pearman, 1819-1908* (London, 1988); D. Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> See below, ch. 1 n. 71; ch. 8 n. 36.

<sup>32</sup> 'Alfred' [Samuel Kydd], *The History of the Factory Movement*, 2 vols. (1857), vol. II, p. 59. For the debate on mid-century transition, see, e.g., J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London, 1974); R. Gray, *The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth-Century Britain, c.1850-1914* (London, 1981); P. Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton, 1980); N. Kirk, *The Growth of Working-Class Reformism in Mid-Victorian England* (Beckenham, 1985); H.J. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London, 1969); T.R. Tholfsen, *Working-Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976).