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British Working-Class Culture circa 1870 to 1950

1. The Emergence of Working-Class Culture before 1914

After 1860 there began to develop in Britain a working-class culture, which, according to Gareth Stedman Jones, was unlike the earlier work-based and radical artisan culture of the Chartist period and which Richard Hoggart has described as 'traditional working-class culture'[1]. This culture was indeed specific to the working class, was a *class* culture; but it was in no way threatening to the existing political and social order. It was rather a commercialised culture of leisure and entertainment. It was characterised by a split between work and leisure, and between the workplace and the home. As far as skilled British workers were concerned, the union might dominate the workplace but leisure time was characterised by a multi-faceted consumerism. Over time this culture spread throughout the country and lasted at least into the 1950s. Amongst its components were the following:

a. *Working-Class Consumerism.* 'Fish and chip shops' (the earliest and – until the 1970s – the most popular form of 'fast food') first appeared around the middle of the 1860s, probably in Lancashire or Yorkshire. Usually fish and chips were sold for consumption off the shop premises, i.e. either outdoors or in the home. Subsequently they enjoyed a spectacular success. By 1913 there were 25,000 fish and chip shops located in the working-class districts of British cities. An investigation in the Southwark area of London in 1914 revealed that 42% of those questioned (all from working-class families) had eaten fish and chips bought from a shop in their own neighbourhood within the last week, whilst a further 16% had bought fish and chips elsewhere. Somewhat later (around 1890) the phenomenon of *high-street shopping* became increasingly important for working-class families. Workers now went out to purchase cheap, factory-manufactured clothes and shoes. They were also able to buy a wide-variety of goods from *co-operative retail stores*, which enjoyed a spectacular success. By 1913 the co-operative stores connected with the Co-operative Wholesale

1 Gareth Stedman Jones, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution, in: New Left Review 90 (1975), pp. 35-69; Ibid., Outcast London, Oxford 1971; Ibid., The Languages of Class Oxford 1983; Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, Harmondsworth 1957 argued persuasively that this 'traditional working-class culture' was being replaced by a commercialised and consumerist *mass* culture in the 1950s. Other important accounts of English working-class culture include Ross McKibbin, The Ideologies of Class, Oxford 1990; Eric Hobsbawm, Worlds of Labour, London 1984; John Golbye and Bill Purdue, The Civilisation of the Crowd, Stroud 1989; Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds), Popular Culture and Conflict, Brighton 1981; P Bailey, Leisure and Class in Victorian England, London 1975; Standish Meacham, A Life Apart, London 1977; Joanna Bourke, Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960, London 1994; B. Rowntree et al., English Life and Leisure, London 1951; J. Clarke et al. (eds), Working Class Culture, London 1979; James Walvin, Leisure and Society 1830-1950, London 1975; H. E. Meller, Leisure and the Changing City 1870-1914, London 1976; Hugh Cunnigham, Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, New York 1980.

Society (the great majority) had a turnover of £88,000,000 a year, controlled 10% of the British retail trade and could boast over 3,000,000 members. The organisation had even become the fourth largest employer in Britain! Goods were also purchased from increasing numbers of chain stores such as Liptons, who owned 500 grocery shops by 1900. In such stores the British worker could purchase – already before the First World War – tea from Ceylon, beef from Australia and even (after 1900) bananas, i.e. the produce of the British overseas Empire. Between 1870 and 1910 per capita consumption of butter and margarine tripled and that of ham and bacon increased sixfold. Between 1909 and 1913 average meat consumption was already as high as it was to be in the 1950s! Cheap credit, primarily in the shape of hire purchase agreements, of which there were one million in 1891, extended the empire of consumerism further.[2]

b. *Working-Class Holidays.* As early as the 1870s (soon after the *Bank Holidays Act* of 1871 decreed national holidays) and as the length of the working week fell, increasing numbers of British workers began to travel from the industrial areas to the seaside, where commercial entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to increase various forms of entertainment aimed expressly at this new clientèle. The classic location of the working-class seaside resort was Blackpool on the Lancashire coast, to which the textile workers of Manchester travelled in their trainloads and which to this day remains a mecca of working-class domestic tourism. Here the old pier charged an entrance fee to its mainly middle-class visitors; but a new pier charged nothing to the new working-class holiday makers. Amusements and fun fairs proliferated along the seafront, as did public houses and music halls.[3]

c. *Mass Circulation Newspapers.* Every Sunday the *News of the World*, which cost only a halfpenny, was bought by huge numbers of workers. This was a newspaper aimed at a lower-class audience and which was dedicated to entertainment and reporting scandals rather than to high politics. It had a national circulation; and by 1905, according to some reports, 80% of all semi-skilled workers bought a newspaper of this kind.[4]

d. *Sports, Spectator Sports and Betting.* Visitors to the United Kingdom were often struck by the nation's dedication to the playing and watching of sports. Ernst Dückershoff, a German miner who came to live and work in North East England, remarked 'all is sport in England'.[5]

2 Hobsbawm, p. 186f.; John Walton, Fish and Chips and the British Working Class, Leicester 1992; Paul Johnson, Saving and Spending. The Working-Class Economy in Britain, 1870-1979, Oxford 1985; John Benson and Gareth Shaw (eds), The Evolution of Retail Systems, c. 1860-1914, Leicester 1992; Bill Lancaster and Paddy Maguire, Towards a Co-operative Commonwealth, Manchester 1996; Johnston Birchall, CO-OP: The People's Business, Manchester 1994; A. M. Carr-Saunders, Consumers Co-operation in Great Britain, Manchester 1938.

3 Hobsbawm, p. 186 and 203; Stedman Jones, Languages, p. 203; J. Lowerson, J. Myerscough, Time to Spare in Victorian Britain, Brighton 1977, pp. 30-44; Asa Briggs, Mass Entertainment. The Origins of a Modern Industry, Adelaide 1960; James Walvin, Beside the Seaside, London 1978; John Walton, The Blackpool Landlady, Manchester 1978; John Walton, The English Seaside Resort, Manchester 1983; John Walton and James Walvin (eds), Leisure in Britain 1780-1939, Manchester 1983.

4 Hobsbawm, p. 185f.

5 Ernst Dückershoff, How the English Workman Lives, London 1899, p. 67.

One commentator recorded in 1911 that the young workers of London were interested in only three things: smoking, clothes and conversation – but in the last case, only if the conversation was about sport.[6] Three years later another remarked that 'football is the greatest single interest in the life of the ordinary working boy'.[7] As early as the 1880s the English Football League, organised by bourgeois entrepreneurs, existed in a form not unlike its present. In 1900 as many as 50,000 (male) workers watched the FA Cup Final, whilst the average attendance at a First Division soccer match was 23,100 in the 1913/14 season. On the eve of the First World War there were 7,000 professional English football players, of whom 2,500 were full-time. In the North of England a professional variant of rugby – *Rugby League* – also emerged. It was a game played and watched by working-class males. English workers displayed a further keen interest in *cricket*, despite the fact that they rarely played the game at this point in time. Their interest stemmed not least from the fact that they bet upon the results. In fact betting on horse races, on football and cricket matches formed a central part of British working-class culture, despite the fact that public betting remained illegal until the 1960s. According to Ross McKibbin betting constituted 'the most successful form of working-class self-help'.[8]

e. *The Music Hall.* Music Halls started life in London's larger public houses. By 1880 there were already 50 of such halls in the nation's capital; and twenty years later 45,000 mainly young Londoners (both male and female) visited the 35 biggest halls each evening. The experience of the music hall has sometimes been seen as a retreat into entertainment, as an escape from proletarian reality. However, if one looks at the numbers performed by singers and comedians in the working-class music halls, then it becomes clear that they were rooted in the daily experience of workers. The songs and jokes celebrated the joys of proletarian existence: eating beef (seen as specifically *English*), drinking beer, travelling to the seaside. Work, on the other hand, was portrayed as something to be avoided, and marriage as a disaster![9]

f. *The Cinema* was to become the greatest symbol of the modern leisure industry and had already made its appearance in the working-class districts of Britain's big cities before 1914. The first moving pictures were shown here in 1896. Eighteen years later there were already three thousand cinemas in the United Kingdom. However, it was in the inter-war period that the cinema came to dominate working-class leisure (especially that of younger workers). It will be discussed later in this essay.

6 A. Paterson, Across the Bridges, London 1911, p. 144f.

7 A. Freeman, Boys Life and Leisure, London 1914, p. 151f.

8 Hobsbawn, p. 185f; James Walvin, The People's Game. A Social History of British Football, London 1975; Tony Mason, Association Football and English Society, Brighton 1980; McKibbin, p. 13f., 102 and 131; Richard Holt, Sport and the British, Oxford 1989; N. Tranter, Sport, Economy and Society in Britain 1750-1914, Cambridge 1998.

9 Stedman Jones, Languages, pp. 205f., 218ff and 223-9; Peter Bailey (ed.), Music Hall, London 1986; McKibbin, p. 9.

2. The Limits of Consumerism

There is no doubt that a working-class culture of consumption and entertainment was much further developed in Britain (and especially in England) than in most European countries; and this for the most obvious of reasons. English workers benefited from a standard of living that was the envy of their continental counterparts. Real wages were significantly higher in England than on the continent, as the following calculations reveal: in 1904 German money wages stood at only three quarters and French at only two thirds the English level, despite the fact the rent, fuel and food were on average 20% more expensive in these continental countries.[10] Falling food prices in the Great Depression (1873-96), combined with the machine manufacture of clothes and shoes, and the import of cheap provisions from the Empire, clearly benefited working-class consumers, as the evolution of real wages makes clear. According to John Benson's index (1850 = 100), these stood at 170 in 1906 and 190 in 1913/14. At the same time the number of weekly working hours declined more or less continuously from 1860. From that year until 1878 the Ten Hour Act was extended to most trades. There came into existence that pattern of work described by outsiders as the *semaine anglaise* (English week), in which most trades had Saturday afternoon (when soccer and rugby league matches were played) free by the 1880s. The average working week of sixty or more hours in the 1860s had been reduced to approximately 48 hours by the end of the First World War. This may help to explain a phenomenon noticed by Belgian and German visitors to England, namely that English workers displayed no great interest in their work, that factory work in England was often very irregular and that employers did not seem to care about it a great deal.[11]

The fact that the working-class culture described above was a consequence of the relative prosperity of some sections of the British working class, however, also reveals its limits. This was a culture of better-off workers, of workers with some disposable income and stability of employment. According to a London report of 1909, 'the poor seldom enter the theatre, dance-halls, the music hall or the concert room; they seem to have little or no contact with the vast crowds hanging around football or cricket matches, or on the outskirts of race courses'.[12] With the exception of shopping, the music hall and the cinema, this was also a *male* culture. The public house and alcohol played a prominent role, especially in the case of younger workers, and women were not welcome in this world. Whilst the men participated in or watched sporting events outside the home, for the great majority of working-class

10 John Benson, The Working Class in England, London 1989, p. 55; Hobsbawm, p. 184ff; Bourke, pp. 5-12.

11 Stedman Jones, Languages, p. 203; Hobsbawm, p. 186; Bourke, pp. 5-12; Dückershoff, p. 19; R. H. Best et al., Brassworkers of Berlin and Birmingham, London 1907, pp. 23 and 139.

12 M. Loane, The Englishman's Castle, London 1909, p. 35. The persistence of poverty is discussed in Andrew Davies, Leisure, Gender and Politics, Buckingham 1992; Richard Roberts, The Classic Slum, Harmondsworth 1973; David Vincent, Poor Citizens. The State and the Poor in Twentieth-Century Britain, London 1991. Also Bourke, pp. 9-25; B. Rowntree et al., Poverty: a Study of Town Life, London 1901.

women, especially the married and the less young, it was the home (and sometimes the church) which formed the centre of sociability. Indeed, as Joanna Bourke has shown, many women saw domestic chores and the creation of comfortable homes not as a burden but something, in which they could take real pride. The home was the domain of the housewife and she ruled it. The commercialised public culture described above was not only restricted by considerations of income and gender, however; it was also a product of the metropolis and only weakly developed in the provinces or the countryside, where more traditional festivals and forms of recreation remained important. There were few music halls outside London, for example. It has further been argued that British working-class culture was not as passive as Gareth Stedman Jones suggests. There were other, more active, forms of recreation amongst the British working class: playing (and not just watching) soccer, boxing, pigeon-breeding, choral singing, cycling, fretwork, stamp-collecting, canary breeding.[13] In some regions, especially in relatively small mono-occupational mining towns and villages, as in South Wales and in County Durham, there was a close interaction of the *miner's institute*, miners' festivals (such as the famous *Miners' Gala* in Durham), choirs, brass bands and the trade unions.[14] There were, in addition to the institutions of pure entertainment, *Working Men's Clubs* and *Mechanics' Institutes*, which sought to educate and 'improve' their members. The powerful consumers' co-operative movement also gave attention to workers' education, providing grants for part-time students and spending £113,000 on educational activities in 1913/14. It also gave material aid to the strike of Dublin transport workers in 1913. Through the Co-operative Women's Guild, established in 1883, it also prepared women for a role in national and local government and agitated for the reform of maternity provision and the divorce laws.[15]

Nonetheless it remains difficult to discover in Britain before the First World War a real equivalent to the mass social-democratic workers' cultural organisations of Imperial Germany.[16] This is so for a number of reasons. Even in County Durham the existence of miners'

13 On the centrality of the home to working-class wives see Jennie Calder, The Victorian Home, London 1977; M. J. Daunton, House and Home in the Victorian City, London 1983; Hobsbawm, p. 189; Carl Chinn, They Worked All their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor, 1880-1939, Manchester 1988; Elizabeth Roberts, A Woman's Place, Oxford 1984; R. Davies, Women and Work, London 1985; Ann Oakley, Women's Work: the Housewife, Past and Present, New York 1974; Melanie Tebbutt, Making Ends Meet, London 1983; Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds), The Rights and Wrongs of Women, Harmondsworth 1976; Jane Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950, Brighton 1984; Jane Lewis (ed.), Labour and Love, Oxford 1986; E. H. Hunt, British Labour History 1815-1914, London 1981, p. 18; Bourke, pp. 62-97. On differences between working-class culture in London and the rest of Britain and on active leisure pursuits see McKibbin, pp. 13-16 and 141.

14 For an account of coalfield culture, in which leisure and work were less distinct, see for example Kenneth O. Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980, Oxford 1981, pp. 59-90; Evan D. Lewis, The Rhondda Valley, London 1959; David Smith, Tonypandy 1910: Definitions of Community, in: Past and Present 87 (1980), pp. 158-84.

15 Hobsbawm, p. 186f.; Lancaster and Maguire, pp. 6, 94-107, 109 and 131; Birchall, p. 109f.

16 For an attempt to compare British and German working-class culture see Dick Geary, Arbeiterkultur in Deutschland und Grossbritannien im Vergleich, in: Dietmar Petzina (ed.), Fahnen, Fäuste, Körper, Essen 1986, pp. 91-101 and 138f.

associations and clubs did not signal a break from the British middle class or from liberal values: for the Liberal Party remained victorious in elections in many of these mining districts (though the experience of South Wales was somewhat different) in the decade before the First World War. Many of the Working Men's Clubs were still of Liberal or even Conservative persuasion in 1914. In fact the great majority of workers' leisure organisations in England had no connection with organised politics or a specific political party. Secondly the British leisure associations remained mainly local and small compared to, for example, the *Arbeitersängerbund* or the *Arbeiter Turn- und Sportbund* in Germany. Almost the sole exception was the cycling club of the socialist newspaper *The Clarion*, which did have a nationwide existence but which again was relatively small compared to its German equivalent, the workers' cycling club *Solidarität*. Thirdly, even in the case of the Working Men's Clubs educational activities decreased with the passage of time and increasingly professional singers and comedians were hired to entertain the membership. Hence it is scarcely surprising that the social commentator A. Shadwell claimed, 'Britain is a nation at play'.[17]

I have sought to explain the politicisation of working-class leisure in Germany and the lack of such politicisation in Britain repeatedly elsewhere.[18] Suffice it to say here that the existence in Britain of a relatively non-interventionist state, employers who were often prepared to deal with unions and a strong consensual liberalism left workers with a predominantly apolitical social life. As Dückershoff remarked admiringly, 'the [English] middle and the working classes are on very friendly terms'.[19] Or at least so it seemed in comparison with Germany. He went on 'politics doesn't come into it. The hatred and mutual hostility one finds in Germany are not to be found here'.[20] Another German visitor, the student of English trade unions Schulze-Gavernitz, concurred: 'Nowhere do we meet the social passion so familiar in Germany, nowhere the belief among the lower classes that salvation can only come through the overthrow and destruction of the existing order (...) the deepseated mistrust, which makes the German worker regard every man in a good coat as an enemy, if not a spy'.[21]

The absence in Britain of large cultural organisations of the kind to be found in German Social Democracy was not only a consequence of a relatively strong cross-class consensus, however, but also related to differences in the housing conditions of British and German workers. As I have argued elsewhere[22], the great density of housing in Germany's large cities prevented the emergence of a family- and home-oriented culture. In fact it drove male workers, especially the young and single, into the public houses and public places where socialist political,

17 On the persistence of Liberal support in the Durham coalfields see McKibbin, p. 7. The quotation is from A. Shadwell, Industrial Efficiency, London 1906, vol 1, p. 29.

18 Geary, Arbeiterkultur; Dick Geary, European Labour Protest. 1848-1939, London 1981, pp. 47-70; Dick Geary, Class in Germany 1848-1939, in: Bradford Occasional Papers 9, Bradford 1988, pp. 42-61.

19 Dückershoff, p. 55.

20 Ibid. p. 25.

21 G. Schulze-Gavernitz, Social Peace. A Study of the Trade Union Movement in England, London 1893.

22 Geary, Arbeiterkultur; Dick Geary, Residence and Working-Class Identity in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th Century, in: Jaroslav Machacek and John Ferris (eds), The European City in the Nineteenth Century, Prague 1995, pp. 81-96.

industrial and cultural organisations (barred from civic buildings by repressive authorities in many parts of Germany) held their meetings. In Britain, on the other hand, cultural organisations not only had to compete with a more highly developed commercial leisure industry but also with a family and domestic leisure largely lacking amongst workers in Imperial Germany. Although the housing of many British workers remained atrocious throughout this period, there were significant improvements in the living conditions of labour aristocrats, who from the 1870s often inhabited single-family terraced housing of the kind one still finds in Nottingham and Leicester, for example. By 1914 four fifths of all families of three or more members occupied at least four rooms. These workers were in consequence able to enjoy what Ross McKibbin has called a 'modest domesticity'. Tenement blocks (*Mietskasernen*), on the other hand, were extremely rare in England outside London, Liverpool and Glasgow.[23]

This culture of domesticity on the part of better-off British workers in single-family housing was reflected in the purchase of all kinds of furniture for their homes. It was reported that 'furniture so filled the houses of the working-class family as to make general movement difficult'.[24] Many workers took pride in the appearance of their homes and saw it as a sign of their *respectability* (although this respectability had little or nothing to do with church attendance, abstinence or thrift, i.e. little to do with bourgeois conceptions of respectability). The gap between *rough* workers, who often changed accommodation to avoid paying the rent, and their *respectable* compatriots was of central importance to Victorian society and did not disappear before 1914. In the homes of skilled workers new rituals became important: family festivals and the 'worker's Christmas', for example. The pub remained important for male sociability; but the home was above all the domain of the working-class wife.[25]

3. British Working-Class Culture after the First World War

Between the wars the British Labour Party made various attempts to emulate the organisational and social life of German Social Democracy.[26] In comparison with the general development of British working-class culture in the inter-war period, however, these were relatively insignificant. The division between work and leisure, and between workplace and home continued to grow: by 1931 only 13% of English working-class wives went to work outside the home. What

23 See note 13 (esp Daunton, Chinn, Calder). Also: John Burnett, A Social History of Housing 1815-1970, London 1978; Stanley D. Chapman (ed.), The History of Working-Class Housing, Newton Abbot 1971; McKibbin, p. 12 f.; Hunt, p. 94.

24 Standish Measham, A Life Apart, London 1977, p. 55.

25 On respectability see Geoffrey Crossick, The Labour Aristocracy and its Values, in: Victorian Studies xiv (1976); Caroline Reid, Middle Class Values and Working Class Culture in Nineteenth Century Sheffield – The Pursuit of Respectability, in: Sydney Pollard and Colin Holmes (eds), Essays in the Economic and Social History of South Yorkshire, Sheffield 1976, pp. 275-82. On the home see the references in note (13).

26 A more positive evaluation of these attempts can be found in Stefan Berger, The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats 1900-1931, Oxford 1994.

is more many clearly preferred housework to work outside the home.[27] The role of the family home and of domestic, family-oriented leisure was reinforced by a reduction in family size, the provision of more spacious accommodation in council housing and the advent of the radio. In 1939 there were already 9 million radio licences in the country and two thirds of all British families had a radio set in their homes. Mass consumption found expression not only in the gigantic growth of consumer credit (mainly in the form of hire purchase) and the ever greater purchase of bicycles and motorbikes, but also in the growth of an advertising industry, which spent £31,000,000 in 1920 and almost twice as much (£61,000,000) only 17 years later. This was also linked to the female consumption of stockings and cosmetics, as well as household products, in the inter-war period. The number of workers visiting the seaside continued to grow, as did the size of football crowds, which reached its peak in 1950. In the 1920s dog tracks were built around a dog-betting industry; and another favourite betting institution – the *football pools* – came into existence. In 1938 some 10,000,000 workers (mainly unskilled) did the football pools. Dance halls (the *palais-de-danse* – pronounced with inimitable English working-class vowels), the first of which appeared in 1919, and dance crazes were all the rage with younger workers of both sexes. Newspaper consumption also increased dramatically: in 1920 there were two, by 1930 five newspapers with a circulation of over one million. By 1937 daily newspaper sales stood at just under ten million and had risen to over fifteen million ten years later. On Sundays in 1947 almost thirty million newspapers were sold. All of this, of course, reflected an increase in disposable incomes: whereas the average working-class family spent 50.7% of its income on food in 1920, the figure had dropped to 46.6% in 1930. Moreover the range of foodstuffs available to workers continued to grow. By the 1930s co-operative stores sold chocolate bars, packed snacks, American-style cereals and imported salmon spreads, for example.[28] The king of the new consumerism, however, was the cinema.

Visiting the cinema became the essential social habit of the age; and most visitors were workers. By 1940 the number of weekly cinema visits stood at 23 million (around 40% of the population). Cinemas, especially those in the city centres, often bore exotic and grand names: *The Rialto, Ritz, Alhambra, Trocadero, Majestic, Palace, Savoy, the Royal, the Regal, the Grand.* From the worker's point of view they could be buildings of unimaginable luxury, with marble staircases, silvery fountains, sparkling chandeliers and uniformed attendants. As one working-class woman recalled, 'the cinema was a favourite "escape" for many of us, and the enormous popularity it possessed is explained by the contrast between our everyday lives at work and the luxury it afforded'.

27 Deidre Beddoe, Back to Home and Duty, London 1989; 'Mass Observation', An Enquiry into People's Homes, London 1983; Bourke, pp. 62-97.

28 Hobsbawm, 185-188; Bourke, pp. 5-9 and 62-97; Mike Savage and Andrew Miles, The Remaking of the British Working Class 1840-1940, London 1994, pp. 57-72; M. Abrams, The Condition of the British People 1911-1945, London 1946; Rosamund Jevons and John Madge, Housing Estates, Bristol 1946; Johnson, Op.Cit; John Benson, Op. Cit; John C. W. Reith, Broadcasting Over Britain, London 1924; Stedman Jones, Languages, p. 79; McKibbin, pp. 110 and 131; Birchall, p. 28; Stephen Salter and Jon Stevenson (eds), The Working Class and Politics in Britain and America, London 1985, p. 140.

The most popular films were the American musicals of Eddy Nelson and Jeanette MacDonald, as well as Westerns and historical adventures. The ten most visited films in the town of Bolton (near Manchester) in 1938 were *Victoria the Great, Stella Dallas, A Star is Born* (with Judy Garland), *Mutiny on the Bounty, Charge of the Light Brigade, May Time, Lost Horizon, Action for Slander, San Francisco* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer.*[29]

In so far as the world of entertainment – at the seaside, in the music halls and the cinema – and material consumption apparently came to dominate working-class recreation, so contemporaries have drawn the conclusion that the relative social peace of Britain compared to so many European countries between the wars (no revolution, no large communist or fascist movements) was directly related to working-class consumerism and the apparent escapism of the cinema. The author George Orwell wrote, 'it is quite likely that fish and chips, silk stockings, tinned salmon, cutprice chocolate, the movies, strong tea and the football pools have between them thwarted revolution'.[30]

Interestingly the sociologist Thorsten Veblen had thought much the same of the English proclivity for sports before the First World War.[31] In my opinion such claims may carry a kernel of truth: the fact that the workers' cultural organisations did not face competition from such a developed leisure industry or from working-class domestic leisure in Germany before 1914 does help to explain their ability to attract such large numbers, which in turn reinforced the political strength of German Social Democracy. However, in general it seems to me that these claims rest upon rather simplistic assumptions about the relationship between politics and recreation.

Firstly we have already observed that aspects of working-class consumerism were restricted to better-off sections of the English working class before the First World War. It remained the case after 1918 that the unemployed and the poorest workers were unable to enjoy anything resembling consumer choice. Andrew Davies' analysis of poverty in Salford (a suburb of Manchester) showed that a lack of money kept the poor away from both pubs and soccer matches. In 1937/38 17% of working-class families in Ancoats (another district of Manchester) never went to the cinema and a further 33% went less than once a week. Before 1940 only better-off working-class households possessed radios; whilst the building of council houses increased social segregation within the English working class. It tended to be better-off workers and their dependants who moved out of the inner-city slums and into the new housing. In those slums, however, a culture of poverty, characterised by petty crime, continued to exist.[32]

29 Hobsbawm, p. 188; Jeffrey Richards, The Age of the Dream Palace. Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-39, London 1984; Audrey Field, Picture Palace, London 1974; Peter Stead, Film and the Working Class, London 1989; Charles Barr (ed.), All our Yesterdays, London 1986; J. P. Mayer, British Cinemas and their Audiences, London 1948; Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith (eds), Cinema, Literature and Society, London 1987. The quotation is from a Leeds co-operative, An Ordinary Lot, Leeds 1985, p. 5, reproduced in Bourke, p. 186.

30 Quoted in Jeffrey Richards, Cinema Going in Worktown. Paper given to Lancaster Conference on Working-Class Culture in Britain and Germany, 1988, p. 8.

31 Thorsten Veblen, Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution, Michigan 1966 (originally 1915), pp. 141-142.

32 Davies, Op. Cit; Bourke, pp. 9-25; B. Rowntree et al., Poverty and Progress, London 1941; B. Rowntree et al., Poverty and the Welfare State, London 1951; Vincent, Op. Cit; Roberts, Op. Cit.

Secondly, although visiting the cinema or going to a dance hall might represent an escape from the rigours of labour, workers were perfectly aware of the fact, as in an earlier quotation. They did not cease to be aware of it simply because they shared cinemas with members of the middle class in the central city cinemas (and they sat in cheaper seats anyway). In any case it was in local 'flea-pits' rather than the grand picture palaces that many workers watched the films. What is more, not all the films popular with working-class audiences were Hollywood romances and some, including those of the singer Gracie Fields and the comedian George Formby, were rooted in the values of the Lancashire working class. Thirdly attendance at dance-halls, the cinema and the sea-side were rarely experienced *individually* or *passively*. You went to the seaside in groups often larger than the individual family. In the cinema, the music hall and the soccer grounds workers were rarely silent spectators.

Thirdly, the relationship between recreation, consumption and political consciousness is far from clear. We have already seen that the co-operative movement in Britain was not just concerned with the purchase of cheap but reliable goods and was certainly not just about profits. The Women's Co-operative Guild, for example, which had 87,000 English members in 1937, supplied English politics only two years later with two mayors, 18 mayoresses and 24 aldermen, as well as 24 county and 253 town councillors.[33] Moreover the massive growth of a consumerist culture in the inter-war period coincided almost exactly with the decision of ever greater numbers of English workers to vote for the Labour Party, which culminated with the election of the first majority Labour government at the end of the Second World War. Just as before 1914 it was precisely the better-off workers with purchasing power, who were also those who joined the trade unions, so after 1918 increasing working-class consumption went hand in hand with a break with middle-class Liberal politics. As Stedman Jones has remarked, nowhere were football supporters more fanatical than in Glasgow; yet that same city produced an aggressively radical working-class politics. Participation in sport – he was a boxer and a keen football supporter – did not prevent Arthur Henderson from becoming a leading figure in the Labour Party. Furthermore the spread of consumerist cultures and commercialised leisure in other parts of Europe, e.g. France and Germany, between the wars did not prevent the simultaneous development of mass communist politics, thus suggesting that the roots of political radicalism are to be found outside the realm of recreation and consumption.[34]

4. Epilogue

This class-specific but consumerist working-class culture, typified also by distinctive dress (the worker's *flat cap*), continued into the 1950s but was increasingly undermined thereafter by a variety of factors. The arrival of television, car and home-ownership testified to unprecedentedly high real working-class incomes and a strengthening of private/domestic existence for many working-class families. The disappearance of old working-class communities as a

33 Birchall, p. 131.
34 Stedman Jones, Languages, p. 87.

result of building programmes and increased geographical mobility, the de-industrialisation of large parts of the country, the dominance of the service sector and the feminisation of work outside the home all contributed to the transition to a predominantly *popular* rather than class-based culture, dominated by the mass media. Now it is not only workers who go to football matches (nor only males). International cuisine and foreign travel are no longer the preserve of the middle class. For the young of all developed countries popular music crosses social barriers and testifies to the globalisation (often = Americanisation) of culture, whilst the video and home PC enhance the possibilities of home entertainment.

To be sure, this is not the end of the matter. Vast differences of wealth continue to exist in the United Kingdom. A new underclass of homeless and unemployed is excluded from the benefits of mass consumption and is often still locked in a culture of poverty. Choices of food, TV channels and holiday resorts do relate to income and social status. Differences of accent still betray the class structure of British education; and ordinary Britons continue to deploy the language of class, as well as to assign class to themselves, in daily discourse. Mobility prospects remain limited for many if not most citizens. Yet difference is now primarily quantitative rather than qualitative, except in the case of the super-rich on the one hand and the increasingly marginalised and truly impoverished (homeless, long-term unemployed) on the other; and this is reflected in the rhetoric of Britain's political parties, which now seek to disavow rather than a classidentity.