How words have been used: notes on the re-making of class

This article is concerned with the growth of working-class self-awareness in nineteenth century Britain. Its starting point is E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class.* At the heart of Thompson's argument was the idea that there were already weavers, artisans and stockingers even before 1780. Fifty years later however they had become something more, a 'class'. Edward Thompson's argument can be summarised by quoting the four brief sentences with which it opens: 'This book has a clumsy title, but it is one which meets its purpose. *Making*, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much as agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.' Or, to cite another familiar passage from *The Making*:

> Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs ... Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.[1]

If Thompson is correct then the creation of class should not be ascribed merely to the working out of social and economic processes such as the birth of industrial technology, the accumulation of labour in large units, the slow separating out of the economic interests of owners, managers and workers. Something more, a process of growing self-awareness, was at work.

Edward Thompson's book was published more than forty years ago. It can hardly be the last word on the subject, and several literatures have indeed grown up since, marching briskly through the same terrain of class, structure, agency and consciousness. Thompson has been accused of misogyny,[2] or of being ignorant of the English, who appear in at least one later work as a nation of stout patriots: a society made by the rejection of the politics whose

tracks Thompson thought he had found.[3] Most of the Thompson-bashing was dated as soon as it appeared,[4] and I am interested really in just one of the many lines of attack. Some twenty years ago, the most important criticism was to accuse Thompson of having neglected the actual language of nineteenth century radicalism and of the Chartist movement. The critics emphasised language because of the influence of French linguistic theory, which seemed then to be a very and new exciting means of analysis. They emphasised Chartism, as I shall, because the birth of this movement seemed to be the clearest piece of evidence in Thompson's armoury.

Such critics as Patrick Joyce and Gareth Stedman Jones[5] argued that the mass of people had simply not shared any of those ideas that Thompson had ascribed to them. They had possessed neither a language nor a consciousness of class. Thus Gareth Stedman Jones' 1983 essay on the language of Chartism maintained that the movement did not employ a class ideology. Properly understood, class was a matter of industry and production. Instead, most Chartists conceived of injustice as taking place in the sphere of consumption. In their imagination, Jones insisted, there was only, 'a harmonious world of production inhabited by masters and men, degraded by the artificial imposition of a political system which sanctions and sustains the extraction of exorbitant interest payments to a purely parasitic class of capitalists who garrison every point of exchange.'[6] 'While there is no denying that class was a child of the nineteenth century', Patrick Joyce wrote, 'when it comes to how the social order was represented and understood, there were other children too who were every bit as lusty as class: indeed, in many respects stronger and more fully part of their time.'[7]

Thompson, it will be recalled, treated class as something whose progress could be marked through its legacy in 'traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms'. In retrospect, there is something striking about this short list: the absence of *language.* One way to read the revisionism of Joyce and others, then, is as a challenge: to look at more closely which words people used to describe themselves, and which words other people used to describe them. Stedman Jones and Thompson fight over the meanings of class; neither school has done much to explore something simpler, its rise as a linguistic style. The emergence of the word 'class' is assumed, it is not

explored, and neither is the demise of rival ways in which artisans or labourers or the poor had described themselves.

One of the striking features of the 1830s and 1840s is undoubtedly the linguistic range open for speakers to identify their audience (or their opponents): common terms included 'the people', 'labourers' as against 'plunderers', the 'wage' or 'social slaves' as opposed to 'the aristocracy of class government', 'we English', 'we Saxons', Marx's term 'the proletariat', Engels' 'working class'. Then and in previous generations, the rich had their own terms, 'the mob' (originally 'the mobile'), or 'the swinish multitude'.

What follows in the rest of the article is an early attempt to track the emergence of several different words, each of which can teach us something about how 'class' was understood, why people chose the word, and why other terms have tended to be discarded. The words I have chosen are 'classes', 'industrious' (as in 'the industrious classes'), 'labourer', 'operative', 'proletariat', 'socialism', 'worker' and 'working class'.

In the three sections that follow, first, (1) I say something about the early history of each phrase, and next (2) I give examples to show how each of these terms appeared in the Chartist and anti-Chartist pamphlet literature of the 1830 and 1840s, and then (3) I look at the use of these words in the title and contents of books published in English from 1800 to 1869 and since. At the end of the article, I say something about how I think Thompson's notion of class-as-creation could be of value to the different movements of our time.

(1) The pre-Chartist history of linguistic markers of class

The fullest account of the origins of the word 'class' appears in Raymond Williams' book *Keywords.* Williams suggests that both 'class' and 'classes' derive from the Latin 'classis', which appeared in England in the sixteenth century with the alternative plural forms 'classes' and 'classis'. At this point, it meant only a division or group. Some modern usages start from this point: the tradition of referring to degrees as classes, or of distinguishing animals by genus, species and class. 'The development of class in its modern social sense', Williams writes, 'with relatively fixed names for particular classes, belongs essentially to the period between 1770 and 1840 which is also the

period of the industrial revolution.' There is a long period during which it is not clear whether a writer, commenting on classes or class, is thinking in the old fashion of multiple classes, or in the more recent fashion of classes as something few in number, and whose interests are opposed. In 1705, Daniel Defoe referred passingly to 'the dearness of wages', which 'forms our people into more classes than other nations can show'.

Other words remained more important, Williams insists, than class. Propertied authors preferred to write of 'estates', 'degrees' and 'orders': as in 'the lower orders'. Williams discovered the phrase 'lower classes' at use in 1772 and 'lowest class' by the 1790s, also 'middling classes' and 'middle classes', so that one author could insist in 1831 that 'the middle classes' were 'the glory of the British name'. Edmund Burke wrote of 'higher classes' in 1791, while in other hands 'upper classes' was common by the 1820s.[8]

The phrase working-class is of more recent provenance: there are relatively few recorded uses of the term that precede 1800. One J. Gray wrote in 1789 of burial plots, 'more spacious plots of ground', which might fairly be allocated 'to the clergyman and schoolmaster, and to other persons superior to the working class.'[9] Another writer J. Aikins, is recorded six years later, describing the limited housing stock of Manchester. 'Houses for the working class', this author writes, 'are not procured without difficulty'.[10]

Raymond Williams dates the term's real use from the early English socialist Robert Owen. He was the first writer to use the term sympathetically. An Owen pamphlet from 1813 writes of the 'poor and working classes', while five years later, Owen would write the phrase into the title of a short book: *Two memorials on behalf of the working classes*.[11] By 1831, there was even a National Union of the Working Classes.

While Raymond Williams tends to treat 'class' and 'classes' as synonymous, E. P. Thompson had a different approach, as has already been discussed. If class was made in the middle years of the nineteenth century, then – Thompson insisted – its popularity was based on the rejection of older blunter forms of knowledge, including that which saw workers as operative or industrious 'classes'. '"Working classes" is a descriptive term', Thompson writes, 'which evades as much as it defines.'[12] 'Class' by contrast was a binary term; it pitted the majority against an enemy: whether professionals

('the middle class'), bosses, the rich or whoever. By 1830, Thompson argued, working-class people had already begun to insist on the basic unity of their experience. The 'classes', he suggested, had become a 'class', those who understood the shift were at the van of class self-identification, and those who still spoke of different 'classes' were no longer at the front.

So what of the working 'classes', in this waning sense? The Birmingham Political Union published a Declaration in 1830, 'That the rights and interests of the middle and lower classes of the people are not sufficiently represented in the Commons House of Parliament.'[13] *Blackwoods Magazine* complained in 1832 of workers who have been 'calumniating the "middle classes".'[14] The quotation marks in the original suggest that as late as 1832, 'classes', like 'class', was still perceived in some quarters as a linguistic innovation; even while those in the van of class allegiance had moved on.

The best sign that the term class was taking on its modern meaning was the increasing willingness of writers to speak of classes as groups of people who were naturally opposed. In 1824, Cobbett spoke of 'one class of society united to oppose another class',[15] while much later *Capital: Volume Three*, Marx would analyse 'three great social classes ... wage-labourers, capitalists and landlords'.[16] 'The essential history', Raymond Williams argued, 'of the introduction of class as a word which would supersede older names for social divisions, relates to the increasing consciousness that social position is made rather than merely inherited.'[17] Class position was made by active choices, including other people's choices, above all the choices of the rich. If inequality was not inevitable, then class struggle could be fought.

'Industrious' was a term employed by nineteenth-century writers to flatter the working population. The phrase 'industrious class' could be found properly in two uses, which were perhaps deliberately run together. In the first sense, industrious meant diligent. Cowper in 1782 praised the 'man, laborious man' who 'by slow degrees ... Plies all the sinews of industrious toil'.[18] A century later, a book of sermons could write of 'Industrious poverty' that it was 'a nobler thing than idle wealth'.[19] In its second use, 'industrious' meant only pertaining to industry. So McCulloch's *Political Economy* writes in 1825 of 'those who are engaged on industrious undertakings'.[20] The first use is Marx's proletariat, the second includes his bourgeoisie.

The word 'labourer' was used as long ago as the Middle Ages to describe a person who worked for a livelihood, a meaning which includes the serf and the cottager in an early period, but probably not the skilled artisan of the nineteenth century. The fourteenth century had its Statute of Labourers: an attempt to keep wages low in the period between the plague and the peasants' revolt of 1381. In Malory's *La Mort Darthur*, King Arthur meets 'a poure man, a labourer'.[21] Four centuries later, the *Daily News* of 1891 could refer to 'an intelligent villager, not a labourer, but a man of the working-class.'[22] So 'labourer' retained some vestigial sense of working poverty: a worker might or might not be a labourer; a labourer was less than an artisan.

As well as 'labourer', nineteenth-century workers could also describe themselves as 'labouring', a term that could also be linked to 'class'. The term was perhaps close to other words such as 'industrious'. There is an early use of 'labouring' in Shakespeare's *Henry VI part III,* 'the labouring heart',[23] and Dryden, 'the waxen work of lab'ring Bees'.[24] Edmund Burke wrote in 1797, 'We have heard many plans for the relief of the "Labouring Poor"'.[25] Lord Macaulay employed language similarly in 1855, deprecating 'riots among the labouring people.'[26]

Burke's association of the word labour with poverty was one that writers more sympathetic to the rights of labour could follow. In *The Rights of the Poor and the Punishment of Oppressors,* Cobbett complained of those who look upon poverty 'as necessarily arising from the *fault* of those who are poor'. Labourers were praised, 'It is in the nature of things that those who are engaged in bodily labour should be the least capable of defending themselves against the effects of oppression.' The rich were attacked. 'The opulent have sought to withdraw aid from the oppressed'. In a bitter last section Cobbett concluded, 'Oppressors ... seldom fail to be hypocrites'.[27]

'Operative', was another synonym for the whole set of labour: an address in the *Mechanics' Magazine* of 1831 was dedicated 'to the Operative Printers of London';[28] while Charlotte Bronte wrote in her 1849 novel *Shirley* of 'members of the operative class'.[29]

The world 'proletariat' seems to have been used rarely and awkwardly in English, but there are mid-century uses: including the *Times* in November 1853, complaining 'We are encouraged to fling the boroughs into the hands of

a poor, ignorant and venal proletariat';[30] George Eliot the novelist and translator of Hegel in 1856, writing of 'the proletariat, or those who depend on daily wages';[31] and the *British Quarterly Review* in 1858, 'Who will make up his "proletariate", or in unambiguous English 'labouring classes'.[32]

As for 'socialism': a letter to the *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1833 was already signed 'A Socialist'.[33] Anti-socialist writers, meanwhile, complained of 'the Socialist, who preaches of community of goods, abolition of crime, of punishment, of magistrates and of marriage',[34] or in the words of one hostile source from 1848: 'The worst of all Socialist plans I have seen is that all have within them ... a damning desire to shirk work.'[35]

In the Middle Ages, the term 'worker' seems to have been used often enough as a synonym for God. Wyclif's *Bible* has Job insisting 'My werkere I shal proue righteous', in which 'worker' stands for 'Maker'.[36] The same book also speaks of a silversmith, 'a worcher in siluer'.[37] In a fifteenth century introduction to the rules of chess, William Caxton included the titles of 'phisicyen' and 'cyrurgyen' among the category of workers.[38]

(2) Linguistic markers of class in Chartist literature

In this second section, I give examples of the ways in which some of these words were actually used by people in pamphlets and short books from the time. The previous section treated meanings as something static: to be defined as if found in a dictionary. In this section, words are analysed in interaction, as symbols of competing political strategies. To narrow the sample, I have chosen books which had one of these synonyms for class in their title and which were written or published in the years between 1830 and 1850. The result in effect is a sample of a dozen of the better-known pro- and anti-Chartist tracts, or books written in the shadow of that movement. For reasons of space, I have not taken data from any of the rich, parallel sources which could be used to similar effect, including Chartist and non-Chartist newspapers, songs, banners and physical artefacts. Following Thompson, I put the greatest emphasis on the Chartist period. I do not assume that Thompson is correct, and that is *the* period in which working class

consciousness was decisively formed. The next section analyses sources from the longer period of 1800-1869 and even subsequently.

When mid-nineteenth century writers chose between different terms to describe class, many did so arbitrarily, but others wrote with a developing sense of class as political strategy. Those who saw workers as a collective of mute, suffering people tended to use terms such as 'labourers', 'the labouring classes', or 'the poor'. Those who associated the poor with anger tended to speak rather of 'workers', 'working men', 'working classes' or 'the working class'. The latter term also embodied a claim for redistribution: *because they worked*, the workers deserved their share. If the issue was justice, then 'working class' was the most suitable term, but there were also more emollient phrases. If a writer spoke of 'operatives' or 'the industrious classes', these uses suggested that these collective groups deserved symbolic recognition. Their contribution was important, reforms should be enacted, and it was only the impossibility of revolution that prevented the industrious classes from deserving as much as their militant advocates claimed.

So for example, a Bradford publican, Peter Bussey supported the physical force wing of the Chartists: those who were ready to use violence if that was required to achieve real change. His 1838 tract against standing armies was titled *An Address to the Working Men of England.* Bussey used linguistic markers of class in a haphazard fashion: he wrote quite neutrally of 'The lives of the working classes'. He attacked 'the soldier hired for the express purpose of keeping in subjection the labouring classes'. He accused the soldiers as a group of taking in taxation 'a portion of that food and that raiment with which the poor man's children ought to be fed and clothed.'[39]

The Reverend Humphrey Price is recorded addressing meetings of strikers in Kidderminster in 1828. Ten years later, he published *A Glance at the Present Times chiefly with reference to the working men*. Price was one of the few writers in the period to define precisely which class he was addressing and explain why. In contrast to Bussey, Price's choice of language was precise: 'By the working men, I mean those who have nothing but their labour and its ever accompanying skill to barter for food and raiment and other comforts of existence, whose daily bread depends upon their daily toil, who, with a propriety peculiarly their own, can pray, "Give us this day our daily

bread."' They were the majority: 'This invaluable order of men forms the great mass of human society.' They were also the one useful, productive class: you could do away with the rich, but society could not survive without workers: 'Bishops and Lords and Kings are not inherent in our society, but superinduced; not absolutely essential to its welfare, but at best of disputable value; that which was made and may be unmade. The very reverse we affirm of working men, the foundation, the support, and stay of all.'[40]

John F. Bray was a printer and bookbinder and a founded of the Leeds Working Men's Association. His 1839 pamphlet *Labour's wrongs and Labour's Remedy* described the working class chiefly as either 'labour', or 'the labourers'. The labourers, Bray complained, were 'placed by their position, at the mercy of men and classes who can have no fellow-feeling with them'. At the end of his pamphlet Bray spoke in very general terms in support of a that would replace 'existing system of separate individual interests' with 'combined individual interests'. It would strive to achieve 'the cultivation of intellect'. The labourers should take 'a broad and comprehensive view of their present position as a whole'. What mattered were 'first principles', 'the test of equality and rights'. Change would come by persuasion not compulsion. The absence of the phrase 'working-class' from Bray's pamphlet, and his choice instead of the word 'labour', may have reflected Bray's feeling that what was needed now was not anger but compromise: labour had its due demands, which capital should agree to meet, if only from a sense of its own self-interest.[41]

William Lovett's 1840 book *Chartism* was a primer to the politics of the movement, it addressed itself 'to the advocates of the rights and liberties of the whole people'. Other terms were used including 'the masses': 'The spirit which has awakened, pervades, and moves the multitude, is that of intellectual inquiry. The light of thought is illuminating the minds of the masses.' Lovett preferred to speak of working classes rather than a working class. As with Humphrey Price, Lovett employed the latter phrase as an abbreviated moral justification. The workers deserved the vote because they, unlike the aristocracy, worked. The universal male suffrage was practicable: it had been granted elsewhere: 'Are the patient, forbearing, hard-working population of Britain less qualified for freedom than the working classes of

Switzerland and America, countries where peace, industry and prosperity bear conclusive evidence in favour of Universal Suffrage?'[42]

John Downes Owens' 1841 pamphlet, *A Lecture on the Pursuit of Really Useful Knowledge*, was written from the hope of turning the autodidact wing of Chartism into an apolitical movement purely for adult education. 'Mechanics' institutions furnish the means of acquiring information with many different advantages, to those for whose improvements they are especially founded, and may, with well-disciplined application serve to qualify you for distinction and usefulness.' Owens' pamphlet was addressed significantly 'to the Commercial and Labouring Classes'.[43] Owens' use of 'labouring classes', as opposed to 'working class', is striking. Those who believed that there was a class war tended to write 'working class', those such as Owens who believed that there should be no such conflict, preferred other terms.

J. Bayly of Yarmouth addressed an 1844 open letter 'to the operatives, mechanics and labourers' of Great Yarmouth. Bayly supported the National Anti-Corn Law League. Such income taxes as there were in the 1840s fell only on the rich: the Corn Laws by contrast were taxes on the poor, who could hardly go without food. Employers also disliked these taxes, holding that because they penalised workers, they obliged employers to pay unnecessarily high wages. In some English towns, the anti-corn law campaigners and the Chartists were allied, in other towns, the two campaigns were fiercely hostile. Bayly's message was that workers and factory owners should co-operate: against the aristocracy. Bayly presented his arguments as relying on economic truth: the key to demand was the affluence of the business classes; 'Your labour thus becomes dependent on a free scope being given to our manufacturers'.[44] Again 'labour' is employed as a class-pacific term.

Frederick Engels' 1844 pamphlet *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, was published in Germany first and for a German audience: the first English translation appeared more than forty years later. But Engels' book was written from an encounter with Chartists in London and Manchester,[45] and it is interesting to compare Engels' approach to that of his English contemporaries: 'The proletariat', he wrote, 'was called into existence through the introduction of machinery ... The first proletarians belonged to manufacture and were begotten directly through it.'[46] I have not been able to

find any Chartist who used the word 'proletariat' at any time in the 1840s. If English radicals possessed copies of pamphlets that used these words, then they were typically untranslated French or German publications.[47]

Thomas Carter's 1845 *Memoirs of a Working Man* is a relatively apolitical autobiography: beginning in 1790, and with details of its protagonist's life at a dame's school, as a draper's boy, and then as a tramp, reading Cobbett, working later as a bookseller.[48] Saddest to a modern ear are those passages[49] in which the author explains that he will soon approach his fiftieth birthday. For a man of his class, that was old age, and the author accepts that he has no kinder future to expect than the workhouse.

'A Fellow Labourer', published an 1848 warning *What the Chartists are: a letter to the English working men*, its author claiming to have recently been expelled from revolutionary France. Labour was dependent on capital, the writer maintained, the workers should be content with what they had. 'Where capital exists, industry may hope for employment, labour to be rewarded with wages!' In France, the author claimed, revolution had led to Terror without end. 'France is ruined!, her capitalists fly, her clubs rage, her troops mutiny, her provinces are scenes of bloodshed, and her workmen, intoxicated by the fine phrases and oratorical flourishes of designing hypocrites, are starving.'[50] The author's use of the term 'working men' was again significant: class division was a reality, the pamphlet recognised, exploitation and oppression were real. No revolution, however, could bring anything but harm.

After 1848, we hear a new post-Chartist voice, grappling with the reality of defeat. James Dawson Burn's *Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* portrayed the life of a tramp without sentiment. A member of the hatters' union in Glasgow, a delegate to union conferences in 1833 and 1834, a member of the city's trades council and the Glasgow Reform Association, Burn lost contact with the Chartists in 1839, joining instead the Oddfellows, a non-union, apolitical organisation, that provided insurance to its members. Internalising its view of the world, Burn insisted that any difficulties he had experienced in business were down to his lacking the skills of the settled middle-classes: their knowledge for example of how to handle wealth. Burns accepted that he was nought but a 'wandering vagrant', an 'uneducated man', a 'mere working man'. His former comrades who had remained Chartists were 'politically mad'.

He himself had been 'left without a shilling'.[51] James Dawson Burns employed the terms of class eclectically or as a synonym for poverty. The sense of class as a badge of effort, as a source of pride, had been temporarily lost.

Another publication, from 1850, again portrays the poor and the workers interchangeably. John Bowen, who described himself as a member of the working class, penned a long public letter in to the Radical MP for Taunton Henry Labouchere. 'The rights of the other classes of society', he wrote, 'from the bold Barons of Runnymead, down to the ten-pounders of 1832, have already been elaborated, together with something more than their rights ... It is notorious that while the other classes have successively obtained their emancipation, and have immensely advanced in wealth, influence and security, the great class, lying out of bounds, have materially retrograded on the comparative scale, until at length the iron has entered into their souls. Link upon link has been fastened on them, unresistingly, and riveted down, without mercy, under the crushing pressure of the workhouse scale.'[52]

The last pamphlet to mention is the autobiography of the journalist W. E. Adams, which was published as late as 1903, but was chiefly a memoir of the Chartist period. The tumults of 1848, Adams describes as doomed to failure. After 1848, Adams worked with another former Chartist Joseph Cowen, the MP for Newcastle, and an early ally of H. M. Hyndman's Democratic Federation, the first Marxist party in Britain. Adams edited Cowan's *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, and supported a number of solidarity campaigns: in defence of revolutionaries in Hungary and Ireland (but always somewhere else). Adams' book, a long analysis of defeat, was titled significantly *Memoirs of a social atom*.[53] An atom, it will be recalled (in the days before atoms could be split) was the smallest conceivable unit of matter. Atoms, it was assumed, were single objects which could not cohere.

(3) Counting the rise and fall of linguistic markers of class

It is impossible to write about class without pausing over the contribution made by Karl Marx in particular. When Marx wrote of the moral claims of the workers, he employed a German term proletariat, whose English usage, if it ever became common, did so only in the aftermath of Marx's own writings.

Marx's idea of the working class as a unique class, the first force in history capable of turning socialism into a reality, shows a strong resemblance – unsurprisingly – to the ideas of the militant Chartists. Marx's 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', puts the argument as follows:

> In the formation [Bildung] of a class with radical chains, a class of bourgeois society which is no class of bourgeois society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which possesses a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong but wrong generally is perpetrated against it; which can no longer invoke an historical but only a human title; which does not stand in any one-sided opposition [Gegensatz] to the consequences but in an all-round opposition to the premises of the essence of the state [Staatswesens]; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society thereby emancipating all the other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the total sacrifice of mankind, thus which can gain for itself only through *the full recovery of mankind.* This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.[54]

This idea of the proletariat as the class of universal suffering is close to the ideas in the Reverend Humphrey Price's *Glance at the Present Times*.

Marx went further however in *The Communist Manifesto*, where he and Engels argued that the bourgeoisie's accumulation and reshaping of the world made a system of general equality possible. Communism was industrialisation plus redistribution: the bourgeois had no interest in the latter, but the workers did. Such a sophistication of approach was of course beyond any of the English sources quoted earlier in the article, but that merely goes to explain why people today read Marx often more than we read his contemporaries.

The interest of this article is in how these various terms for class were used, and that must include some sense of which terms were prevalent and when. Another way to map the rise of the languages of class is to look at the titles of books and pamphlets recorded in the electronic catalogue of the British Library, which at this time did attempt to keep a complete record of all

pamphlets and books published in the United Kingdom. The following is simply a list of the eight terms already mentioned; and how often each appeared in a book title through the first seven decades of the century[55]:

	1800-9	1810-9	1820-9	1830-9	1840-9	1850-9	1860-9
Classes	86	91	133	301	336	468	396
Industrious	15	11	6	30	12	15	1
Labourer	14	14	22	24	28	42	25
Operative	2	4	28	50	43	61	72
Proletariat	0	0	0	0	7	1	4
Socialism	0	1	0	17	49	36	3
Worker	1	1	0	1	3	9	7
Working class	0	0	1	2	7	5	11

A few notes on the above: 'classes', as has already been suggested was a term which could appear in more contexts other than just the historical, the economic or the political: it was used in biological and educational contexts. It is not at all surprising therefore that the term dominates numerically.

The term 'proletariat' was rare in English: all of the books found in the British Library catalogue from this period with proletariat in the title were in fact French or German texts.

Several of these terms seemed to grow in use generally through this period: such terms as 'classes', 'operative', 'working class' were more commonly used from decade to decade. Others went into decline: witness the sharp fall in the numbers of books after 1859 addressed to or studying the industrious or the industrious classes. With the defeat of the revolutions of 1848, something similar happens to the word 'socialism'. A last point: while the terms 'worker' and especially 'working class' may have been the most accurate descriptions available to those who wanted to challenge the entire social system, each term was still used only by a minority.

Since December 2010, it has in addition been possible to search the 5.2 million books scanned by Google from books published in Chinese, English, French, Spanish, German, Hebrew and Russian between 1500 and the present and deposited with university libraries.[56] There are limitations to the utility of this source. The words in this database are words in written rather than spoken English, whereas the period which interests us of course preceded universal education, and the number of actual workers who wrote books was very few. A large number of nineteenth century books and pamphlets have been lost, and we can assume that working-class pamphlet literature was especially vulnerable. Google's search interface only enables us to rank the use of words relatively and not absolutely.

With those notes of caution stated the picture seems to be broadly as follows: by far the most common of the above eight terms was 'classes', which accounts for 0.0065% of all words used in English language books (or 7 in every hundred thousand) by 1850. The next category are 'industrious', 'labourer', 'operative', 'worker', representing between 0.0001% and 0.002% of all words used between 1800 and 1869 ('industrious' is the most common, 'worker' the least). In the rear come a third group, 'working class', 'proletariat', 'socialism', all of which amounted to less than 0.00005% of all words used.

Within each of these categories, slightly different patterns are at work. The use of the term 'classes' increased five-fold (0.001% to 0.005%) between 1800 and 1832, and increased again albeit more slowly thereafter to 1848 (0.0055%) but was more or less stable thereafter to 1869.

The term 'industrious' went through a three-fold rise, albeit from a lower base (0.0006% to 0.0015%) between 1800 and 1819, but fell thereafter, and in particular during and after the Chartist period, and its use in 1869 was not much more than it had been in 1800. The terms 'labourer', 'operative' and 'worker' were essentially no more or less common in 1869 than 1800, save that 'labourer' went through a very rapid bell-curve between 1825 and 1840, rising in use sharply between 1825 and 1835, before falling again by 1840 to where it had been in 1825. The words 'operative' and 'worker' both became more common consistently through this period, increasing three-fold and five-fold respectively, with operative having almost caught 'labourer' by 1869.

Use of 'industrious', 'labourer', 'operative' 'worker' 1800-1869[57]
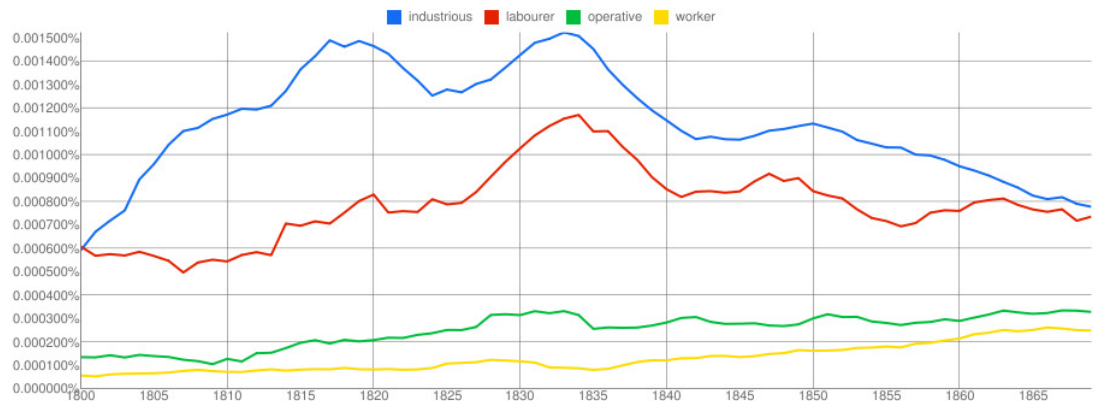
Within this group, 'working class' enjoyed a twelve fold increase in relative use from 1800 to 1860 (0.000005% to 0.00006%) with spikes of increased use between 1827 and 1832, 1836 and 1842, and a further doubling of its use between 1860 and 1867 (0.000025% to 0.00006%). Yet even with its increased use in 1869 the phrase was still only about a quarter of as common as 'worker'. The term 'proletariat' enjoyed a spike of usage between 1827 and 1835, before returning to its starting point. 'Socialism' increased eight-fold between 1840 and 1852, before tailing off thereafter.[58]

Use of 'working class', 'proletariat' and 'socialism' 1800-1869[59]
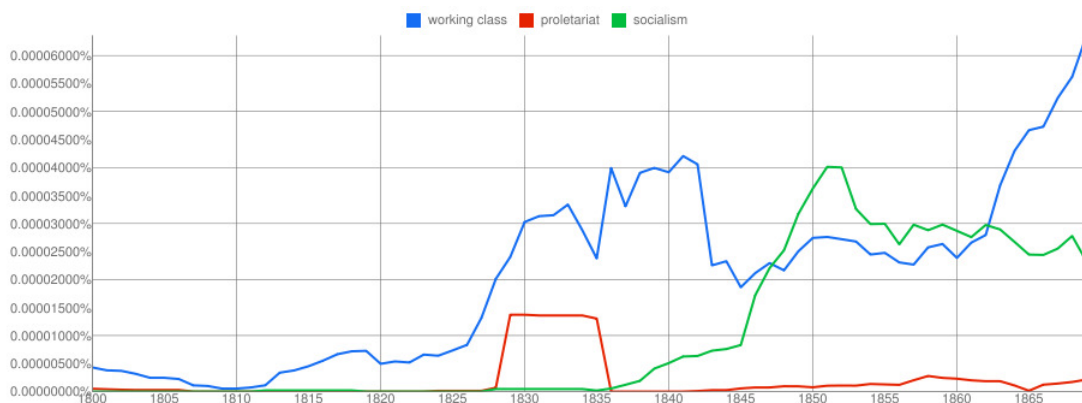
Now, if the shift from 'working classes' to 'working class' in particular is a key marker of class consciousness, then the chronology of linguistic use runs counter to the dates emphasised by historians. In 1810, the term 'working classes' and 'working class' were equally common, before 'working

classes' achieved a clear linguistic hegemony. 'Working classes' remains by far the more popular terms thereafter, with no evidence of a turn towards from 'working class' during the Chartist era. By 1869 'working classes' was about six times as common as 'working class'. If we extend the picture, we discover that 'working class' overtook 'working classes' as the more popular term only in 1930,[60] after which it has remained the more popular term, 'working class' having declined in use between 1983 and 2004 before increasing recently.[61]

Use of 'working classes' and 'working class' 1800-2011[62]
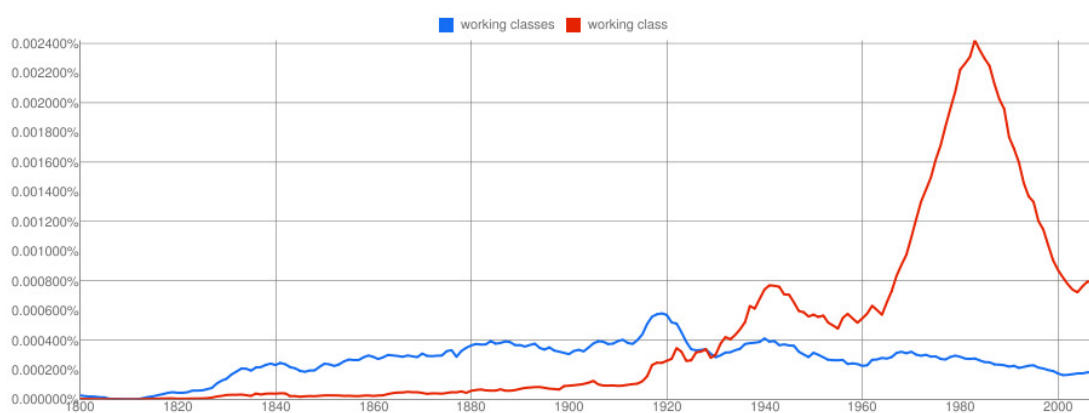
We must be wary of concluding too much from a single source. But if Thompson was right to emphasise the shift from a language of 'classes' to one of 'class', it appears that the new language became the habit of the majority only eight decades after Chartism had ended.

Conclusion

Perhaps one way to summarise this entire process, and what it teaches us about class formation, would be to say that radical language expanded to allow these different images of labour, and then narrowed again, choosing class and working class as the most effective metaphors to enable struggle. Behind these competing terms were different visions of the rich and the poor, the owners and the workers, and different strategies for collective struggle, implying different degrees of working-class independence from their rulers. The choice of class independence was not a decisive, once-and-for-all step

but was the accumulated wisdom of a thousand strikes, elections and other campaigns. The conscious decision to advocate political separation was a badge passed between generations. The decision of people to identify themselves as a class is an important marker of this process.

Seen from the perspective of labour in our own day, the significance of the growth of the factory system in the nineteenth century is different. What was at stake in the industrial revolution was never a one-off process, but one of several waves of technological change: so that the formation of a trade of Lancashire cotton spinners was no more decisive to class formation than the struggles by dockworkers in many countries a hundred years later, the demise of the British cotton industry after 1900, or the development of new centres of global manufacturing in the past two decades.

Portraying the making of working-class politics as a political, social and cultural *choice* enables us to see similar process at work in the present. There is no reason why a history of work, written a hundred years from now, would necessarily choose miners or factory workers as the most representative faces of labour. Why not nurses caring for elderly or sick adults, or call-centre workers, or people working in offices, or at Wal-Mart or MacDonalds? Each new generation of industrialisation puts people at work in similar roles, so that they may see links between their situation and that of other workers. But without a consciousness of class, other kinds of political organising can dominate: poor people may organise to reduce the price of consumed goods or privatised services, and such forms of struggle can actually make class seem less important. The struggle of employed workers to raise the price of their labour is different from that of bread rioters trying to reduce their living costs: the situation of the former makes them more likely to adopt a class consciousness. Class is not about poverty, it is about work. As work changes, classes will continue to be made, unmade and remade anew.

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[1] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), pp. 9-10.
[2] J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), pp 71-7.
[3] L. Colley, *Another Making of the English Working Class: the Lash and Imperial Soldiery* (London, 2003); also L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1996).

[4] There are more sympathetic accounts in S. Ashman, 'The Communist Party Historians' Group', in J. Rees (ed), *Essays on Historical Materialism* (London, 1998), pp. 145-60; also A. Callinicos, 'Marxism and the crisis in social history', in Rees, *Essays*, pp. 25-40; and B. D. Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions* (London, 1994). Meanwhile, I have discussed Thompson previously in two articles, 'E. P. Thompson', *New Correspondence* 1/1 (2004), pp. 20-4, and 'E. P. Thompson: History and Commitment', *New Politics* X/3 (2005), pp. 96-109, and in my book *Dissident Marxism: from the 1930s to the fall of the Berlin Wall* (London: Zed, 2004).

[5] Key sources include P. Joyce, 'The end of social history?', *Social History* 20 (1995), pp. 73-91 ; J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, 'The poverty of protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the politics of language: a reply', *Social History* 18 (1993), pp. 1-15; J. Vernon, 'Who's afraid of the 'linguistic turn'? Politics of social history and its discontents', *Social History*, 19 (1994), pp. 81-97; P. Joyce, 'The return of history: postmodernism and the politics of academic history in Britain', *Past and Present*, no. 158 (1998), pp. 207-35; G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History* (Cambridge, 1983); P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class* (Cambridge, 1991); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A study in English political culture c.1815-67* (Cambridge, 1993).

[6] Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, pp. 134-7.

[7] Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p 1. The revisionism of Joyce and Stedman Jones has generated its own critics in turn. G. Eley and K. Nield, 'Starting over: the present, postmodern and the moment of social history', *Social History* 20 (1995), pp. 355-64; D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, 'Social history and its discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the politics of language', *Social History* 17 (1992), pp. 165-88; D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, 'Reply to "The poverty of protest" and "imaginary discontents"', *Social History* 18 (1993), pp. 219-33; N. Kirk, 'History, language, ideas and postmodernism: a materialist view', *Social History* 19 (1994), pp. 221-40; R. Samuel, 'Reading the signs I', *History Workshop Journal* 32 (1991), pp. 81-109; B. D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: the Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); E. M. Wood and J. B. Foster (eds), *In Defense of History* (New York, 1997); N. Kirk, *Social Class and Marxism: Defences and Challenges* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 101; also M. W. Steinberg, *Fighting Words: Working Class Formation: Collective Action and Discourse in Early Nineteenth Century England* (Ithaca, 1999). Keith Flett in particular has suggested that a movement of workers emerged later than Thompson saw it, not from Chartism in its height but from its decline. K. Flett, *Really Useful Knowledge and the Politics of Radical Education with reference to the working-class press 1848-1870* (London, 2006), that approach appears to be corroborated by the material towards the end of this article.

[8] R. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1976), pp. 51-9.

[9] Cited in G. Dempster, *Discourse containing a Summary of Proceedings of the Society for extending the fisheries and improving the Sea Coasts of Great Britain* (London, 1789), p. 50.

[10] J. Aikin, *A description of the Country Thirty to Forty Miles round Manchester* (London, 1795), p. 262.

[11] R. Owen, *Two memorials on behalf of the working classes* (London, 1818).

[12] Thompson, *The Making*, p. 9.

[13] C. Wakefield, *The life of Thomas Attwood* (London, 1885), p. 133.

[14] *Blackwoods Magazine*, January 1832, 131/2.

[15] W. Cobbett, *The Law of Turnpikes* (London, 1824).

[16] K. Marx, *Capital, Volume Three* (London, 1959).

[17] Williams, *Keywords,* p. 53.

[18] W. Cowper, *Poems* (London, 1782), 'Heroism'.

[19] J. Brown, *Sermons* (Glasgow, 1892), p. 207.

[20] J. R. McCulloch, *Principles of Political Economy* (Edinburgh, 1825), p. 45.

[21] T. Malory, La Mort Da*rthur* (London, 1529 edn), vol. III, ch. xi, line 113.

[22] *Daily News*, 1 September 1891.

[23] W. Shakespeare, *Henry VI part II* (London, 1985 edn), act III, scene ii, line 163.

[24] J. Dryden, *Translations from Juvenal* (London, 1697), p. 88.

[25] E. Burke, *A third letter to a Member of the present Parliament, on the proposals for peace with the Regicide Directory of France* (London, 1797), p. 219.

[26] Lord Macaulay, *History of England* (London, 1848-1861), volume iv, p. 421.

[27] W. Cobbett, *The Rights of the Poor and the Punishment of Oppressors* (London, n.d.), pp. 3-14.

[28] *Mechanics Magazine* XIV/1831, p. 106.

[29] C. Bronte, *Shirley* (London, 1849), ch. xxii.

[30] *The Times*, 19 November 1853.

[31] *Westminster Review*, October 1875.

[32] *British Quarterly Review* LVI (1858), p. 442. This is the original spelling.

[33] *Poor Man's Guardian*, 24 August 1833.

[34] *The Crisis*, 31 August 1833.

[35] T. W. Reid, *An account of the Life of the Hon. W. E. Forster* (London, 1888), Vol. I, p. 246.

[36] Job xxxvi. 3.

[37] Acts xix. 24.

[38] W. Caxton, *To the right noble, right excellent vertuous prince George duc of Clarence* (Bruges, 1476), iii. V. 119.

[39] P. Bussey, *An Address to the Working Men of England* (Bradford, 1838), p. 11

[40] Rev. Humphrey Price, *A Glance at the Present Times chiefly with reference to the working men* (London, 1838), p. 3.

[41] J. F. Bray, *Labour's wrongs and Labour's Remedy, or, the Age of Might and the Age of Right* (Leeds, 1839), pp. v, 210-4.

[42] W. Lovett and J. Collins, *Chartism: A new Organization of the People* (Leicester, 1969), pp. 1-7.

[43] J. D. Owens, *A Lecture on the Pursuit of Really Useful Knowledge Addressed to the Commercial and Labouring Classes* (London, 1841), p. 11.

[44] J. Bayly, *A Letter to the operatives, mechanics and labourers, who have the right of voting in the election of members of parliament for the borough of Great Yarmouth* (Yarmouth, 1844), p. 10.

[45] D. Riazanov, *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels* (London, 1927), pp. 70-1.

[46] F. Engels, *The condition of the working class in England in 1844* (New York, 1887). Cited in S. Marcus, *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class* (London, 1974), p. 142.

[47] Although the American Saint Simonian Orestes Augustus Brownson complained in 1842 that 'The middle class is always a champion of equality, when it corners a class above it, but it is its inveterate foe, when it concerns clearly a class below it.' To describe the latter Brownson employed the Latin 'proletarii': 'Th[e middle class] has done nothing for its labouring population, the real proletarii. It has humbled the aristocracy, it has raised itself to dominion, and it is now conservative, conservative in fact, whether it calls itself Whig or Radical.' O. A. Brownson, *The Labouring Classes* (Boston, 1842), pp. 8, 9.

[48] Anon [T. Carter], *Memoirs of a Working Man* (London, 1845).

[49] The book was published many years after it was written.

[50] 'A Fellow Labourer', *What the Chartists are* (London, 1848), p. 3.

[51] J. D. Burn. *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* (London, 1978), pp. 39, 171.

[52] J. Bowen, *The Russell Predictions on the Working Class, the National Debt and the New Poor Law* (London, 1850), p. 3.

[53] W. E. Adams, *Memoirs of a social atom* (London, 1903), pp. 158-9

[54] K. Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction,' in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Marx and Engels: Collected Works* (London, 1974)*,* here Vol. 3, p. 186.

[55] Catalogue.bl.uk searched 22 May 2006.

[56] grams.googlelabs.com, searched on 15 January 2011 and 13 September 2011.

[57] Source: http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/graph?content=industrious%2Clabourer%2Coperative%2Cworker&year_start=1800&year_end=1869&corpus=6&smoothing=3 accessed on 13 September 2011.

[58] By comparison, the word 'the' accounts for 6% (or one in every sixteen words) at the same time.

[59] Source: http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/graph?content=working+class%2Cproletariat%2C+socialism&year_start=1800&year_end=1869&corpus=6&smoothing=3 accessed on 13 September 2011.

[60] 'Middle class' overtakes 'middle classes' in 1915.

[61] 'Working class' reaches its peak linguistic use in 1980, by which time it accounts for 0.0024% (or 1 of every 40,000) recorded English words. It declines thereafter, as do 'ruling class' (from 1983), and 'socialism', and 'middle class' (both, from 1987).

[62] Source: http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/graph?content=working+classes%2Cworking+class&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=6&smoothing=3 accessed on 13 September 2011. When all books in English are searched (i.e. books deposited in American as well as British libraries), the hegemony of 'working class' is pushed back to 1919 rather than 1930.