‘CRIMINALLY SENSELESS’. RITUAL AND POLITICAL STRATEGY IN MID-VICTORIAN POPULAR RADICALISM

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Among the studies on the role of ritual in mid-Victorian popular radicalism, questions of political strategy only play a minor part. Certainly, James Epstein in his pioneering essays on radical expression considered the strategic importance of ritual in the context of radicals’ appropriation of a constitutionalist idiom which he and others found informing radical politics well into the nineteenth century.[1] However, political ritual still emerges as an instrument of expression directed at wider public opinion or as a tool for achieving a sense of identity and purpose inside popular radical circles. It hardly features as a place of contention within radicalism over strategic choices which crucially determined the further direction of radical politics.

Dealing with labour rituals, Eric Hobsbawm emphasised their importance in the process of creating working-class identities.[2] Even avowedly post-modernist historians who set out to deconstruct received historiographic visions of class, remained wedded to the linkage of ritual and identity. Although denying any preponderance of class consciousness as a location of identity, they aimed to uncover multiple ways of constructing popular identities which involved the use of ritual in much the same way as the construction of working-class identities was said to have done. For example, in his much-debated book on ‘Politics and the People’ James Vernon aimed to show ‘how people used and interpreted ceremonial events in different ways’. He directed his attention at local forms of ritual which celebrated national events or established a sense of communal belonging in particular towns. The rituals he analysed ‘provided occasions at which individuals right across the social, sexual, and political spectrum, voters

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1 James A. Epstein, *Radical Expression. Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York 1994); James Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution. New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteeth Century* (Cambridge 1996); John C. Belchem, 'Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Social History*, 6 (1981), 1-32. I am grateful to Tony Taylor for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2 Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'The Transformation of Labour Rituals', in id., *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London 1984), 66-82.

and non-voters alike, were allowed to demonstrate their attachment to the nation, however variously defined’.[3] In this approach ritual remains an expression of identity, even if the same ritual may serve to transport different visions of identity to which different actors are attached.

The following chapter is not primarily concerned with ritual as an expression or way of constructing identity. Rather, it highlights conflicts over the proper use of ritual within popular radicalism. Instead of starting with an analysis of certain forms of ritual which might carry different meanings for different actors, the argument concentrates on debates within popular radicalism about which forms of ritual should be used in the first place. In arguing that ritual *itself* became a crucial point of contestation within popular radicalism, the paper aims to show that beneath the use of ritual lay a struggle about the proper strategy popular radicals were to pursue in the early 1870s.

The analysis of radical ritual in these years emerges from a generalised framework of the development of radical political expression in the mid-Victorian period. The framework I would like to suggest starts from the observation that in the development of public ritual – as in radical expression in general – two dimensions can be distinguished, which we might term a ‘structural’ and a ‘chronological’ one. In the ‘structural’ perspective, we can observe that at any given point in time, radical public expression moved along a scale of behaviour that was considered to be ‘respectable’ or ‘unrespectable’. Both terms of course did not stay fixed over the Victorian period but changed over time. Still – they provided the basic categories by which public expression was judged both by radicals themselves and the wider public. These categories were applied even if the classification of specific forms of behaviour into either of these categories remained contested between different actors. If the dynamics of mid-Victorian radical expression are to be understood, it is of fundamental importance to acknowledge that both ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ behaviour can be discerned in radical activities throughout the nineteenth century.

Switching to the ‘chronological’ dimension, we might observe indications of continuity. British historians such as Antony Taylor emphasize continuities of unrespectable traditions within popular radicalism, while others, such as Eugenio Biagini, have concentrated on the more main-stream Liberal elements in popular politics that were widely accepted as being ‘respectable’.[4] However, the

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[3] James Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge 1993), at 49, 79.

[4] Antony Taylor, '"A Melancholy Odyssey among London Public Houses": Radical Club Life and the Unrespectable in Mid-Nineteenth-Century London', *Historical*

‘chronological’ dimension does not only feature continuities. Seen over several decades, from the early Chartists via the mid-Victorian popular radicals up to the Socialist agitation of the 1880s, breaks and uneven developments spring into view. At times, such as the 1860s, ‘respectability’ and ‘moderation’ seemed to be the main feature of popular radicalism, while at other times, popular expression seemed to be dominated by either ‘rough’ or ‘revolutionary’ elements. The question of discontinuities in public agitation formed one of the crucial elements in the traditional debate on whether there was a ‘break’ in popular radicalism after Chartism.

This might seem contradictory. Is it possible to discern continuity all round and yet talk of breaks and discontinuities at the same time? The answer is: Yes, and it becomes clear as soon as the ‘structural’ and the ‘chronological’ dimension are seen in combination. The breaks along the ‘chronological’ line of development reflect shifts on the ‘structural’ level, more precisely: shifts in the general perception of the role and legitimacy of ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ behaviour in popular radicalism. At certain times, the general impression might be that the modes of popular expression were ‘respectable’, while at other times ‘unrespectable’ features seemed to dominate. However, this never meant that either ‘unrespectable’ or ‘respectable’ forms of behaviour ever disappeared - they might simply be pushed to the margins at certain times, while coming to the fore at others; in fact, forms of expression that did not seem to change at all might move between categories, being seen as ‘unrespectable’ at certain times and as ‘respectable’ at others. If applied to the continuity debate, this means that if we look for continuities, we will always plausibly find continuity both in the ‘respectable’ and in the ‘unrespectable’ aspect of popular radicalism. It is not surprising to find either of them – the difficult task is to judge their respective impact on the general dynamics of popular radicalism over time.

Of course, categories such as ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ are rather crude. They allow the establishment of a model-oriented analysis of popular political expression throughout the nineteenth century but in order to convince, they need much more contextualisation. As indicated above, the very definition of what was ‘respectable’ or ‘unrespectable’ behaviour was malleable and changed over time. Forms of expression that were deemed unrespectable in one decade might be seen as respectable a decade later. All this makes for the multi-faceted, colourful prospect of nineteenth-century popular radicalism.

Research, 78 (2005), 74-95; Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform. Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge 1992).

More important in our context, it made for the strategic dimension of ritual. Rituals had functions within popular movements, but they were also noted and judged by the wider public. For this reason, behaviour that was lodged in widely-deemed ‘unrespectable’ traditions became problematic at times when a strong trend towards ‘respectability’ characterised the mainstream of popular politics or was expected by the wider public. In consequence, ritual cannot simply be seen as a reflection of identity or an instrument in the construction of a common sense of purpose. Rather, debates over the proper application of particular forms of ritual developed into locations for the struggle over the most appropriate modes of public expression of radical politics.

This chapter argues that such a constellation can be found in the early 1870s. Ritual provided a location for discussions over the strategic direction of popular radicalism. Struggles over ritual reflected struggles over direction; perceptions of ‘respectability’ informed the debates within popular radicalism because popular radicals knew all about the importance of these perceptions by the wider public.

The first part of the chapter will show general changes in the public and radical perception of certain forms of popular ritual. These changes will be presented as examples for the shifts on the ‘structural’ level along the ‘chronological’ dimension. The second part will argue that the conflicts over strategy inside popular radicalism in the early 1870s delivered a severe blow to the unrespectable tradition. This does not mean that the unrespectable tradition was at an end from there on, but it had to recede, lost much of its legitimacy and more often than not could be denigrated as fringe lunatism.

I.

Perhaps it is adequate to start with a caveat: Not all forms of ritual were equally bound up with struggles over strategy. However, a brief survey of the development of radical ritual shows that beneath layers of continuity, significant changes in the perception of ritual occurred during the course of the nineteenth century – changes which provided the background for the strategic struggles of the early 1870s.

When James Epstein demonstrated in which ways rituals such as radical dining and toasting contributed to shaping an autonomous popular public sphere, his focus was on the pre-Victorian era. Ritual played a vital role for the survival of radicalism in times of political oppression, especially during the revolutionary years of the 1790s and the post-Napoleonic repression of political expression following the Peterloo massacre of 1819. Rituals in these times were ‘calculated

gestures of defiance to both state and local authority’.[5] Public demonstrations, often preceded by processions, were permeated by symbolism and the definition of certain assumed roles and meanings by the participants. Banners and flags carried political slogans and messages, speeches were given and resolutions passed, well-known orators were venerated by the people. All these elements can still be recognised in mid-Victorian times. By the 1860s, the very choice of the meeting-place could be an act of symbolic expression. London democrats of the 1860s liked to gather at the Reformers’ Tree in Hyde Park, with its allusions to the Jacobin tree of liberty. Hyde Park in fact became the ‘classic ground’ for democratic meetings after the park railings had been torn down during a reform demonstration in 1866. For popular radicals, these so-called ‘Hyde Park riots’ counted as a fundamental step in forcing the government to grant an extension of the franchise in the Reform Act of 1867. Never mind the true impact of the event on parliamentary politics – as late as 1886 the ‘Hyde Park riots’ were still the historical reference point for the Social Democratic Federation when celebrating the success of one of their own public meetings.[6]

Events such as the ‘Hyde Park riots’ were adopted into a kind of commemorative calendar. In the early nineteenth century, radicals had regularly celebrated the anniversary of the Peterloo massacre or the birthday of Thomas Paine. By mid-Victorian times, many more dates that occasioned celebrations had been added to the calendar, such as the birthday of the Chartist leader Feargus O’Connor or the anniversary of the French revolution of February 1848. The commemoration of Chartism continued to serve as a focal point for a specifically popular tradition of liberty well into the 1880s by which time many popular radicals had become absorbed into the Liberal Party.[7]

A highly ritualised form of gathering in the early nineteenth century were radical dinners where toasting and singing contributed to a feeling of solidarity among the participants. Held in closed halls, the rooms were usually decorated according to the occasion of the dinner. This also was a tradition that easily survived into mid-Victorian times. For example, when the former Chartist Ernest Jones gave a lecture on his political principles in 1856, the hall was decorated

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5 Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 152.

6 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 Nov. 1886, 1-2.

7 Antony Taylor, 'Commemoration, Memorialisation and Political Memory in Post-Chartist Radicalism: The 1885 Halifax Chartist Reunion in Context', in Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Roberts (eds.), *The Chartist Legacy* (Woodbridge 1999), 255-85.

with flags and flowers in the colours of Poland and France, all symbols meant to support the idea of liberty.[8] In this case, internationalist connotations merged with the innate British constitutionalist tradition of liberty singled out by many writers in recent years as the cornerstone – or master-narrative – of British popular radicalism.[9]

However, these undeniable continuities in ritual and symbolic expression must not tempt us into overlooking fundamental changes in the function and context of ritual. A rather outward example for the changed position of a ritual within the world of radical expression is the case of the dinner of solidarity. The dinners described by Epstein often followed large outdoor demonstrations. While the demonstrations expressed the claim of the people to be part of the public sphere, the dinners served to integrate the radical community in the face of potential repression. They immersed the participants in an encouraging atmosphere of ritualised invocation of the admired martyrs of ‘the cause’ of liberty.[10]

By the 1870s, the dinners themselves may have looked very much like their earlier models but their function within radical politics had changed notably. Only few dinners were held to affirm a political position in the face of government repression. A rare example is a series of complimentary dinners in 1868 for Charles Bradlaugh, the main spokesman of political atheism. The dinners were given in protest against the government’s attempt to stop the circulation of Bradlaugh’s secularist newspaper, *The National Reformer*.[11] Frequently, the social aspect of dinners assumed priority over political functions. For example, the annual dinners of the London Patriotic Society, a radical group from Clerkenwell, primarily seemed to serve as an occasion to assemble for a memorable get-together which would include the families of the activists.[12] Yet another type of dinner was organised in honour of George Odger, one of the leading working-class politicians of his time. When he was celebrated at Southwark in 1870, it was on occasion of his parliamentary candidature in the borough. In this case, the democratic dinner had moved into the sphere of ‘official’ politics. It had become an instrument to express support for a labour

8 *People's Paper*, 8 Nov. 1856, 1.

9 See note 1.

10 Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 152.

11 *National Reformer*, 26 July 1868, 60 (T. Evans: Complimentary Dinner to Mr. C. Bradlaugh at Birmingham).

12 *National Reformer*, 25 Feb. 1872, 125 (Report of Meetings: London Patriotic Society).

candidate at a by-election for the House of Commons.[13] In none of these cases was the dinner directly connected to a prior public demonstration. It survived as a mode of radical expression, but its cutting edge as a means of opposition towards elite politics had started to wear off.

A most striking example for the move of radical ritual into the direction of ‘official’ political culture is provided by the way public demonstrations were organised in mid-Victorian times. Great emphasis was placed on order and crowd control, especially so when delicate issues were at the heart of demonstrations. In October 1869, a large demonstration was organised to demand the release of the Fenian agitators in British prisons. Many democrats considered them to be Irish freedom fighters, while for the government they were nothing but terrorists. The preparation of the demonstration provides a telling picture of well-ordered democratic ritual. The demonstration was announced in the London press, with details given to prospective participants about their expected behaviour. The people were to meet at specifically named places in their respective districts and to march four deep to Trafalgar Square, ‘under the control of district marshalls’. Each procession was to be headed by a band, and the officers of each contingent had to wear small flags denoting the district they came from. Moreover, people were asked to wear rosettes in their national colours. These provisions reveal the internationalist element in this demonstration whose organising committee was headed by J. P. McDonnell, the Irish secretary of the International Working Men’s Association (First International).

At Trafalgar Square, the processions were to gather at carefully arranged intervals in order to join a big central procession to the Reformers’ Tree in Hyde Park. Not only was the route to Hyde Park predetermined, but also the order of the procession. It started with horsemen bearing flags, followed by the central body and ‘a splendid brass band’. The close was reserved for a ‘ladies’ procession’ marching four deep and carriages with gentlemen supporting the cause of the meeting. Every precaution was taken to guarantee an orderly meeting: printed versions of the resolutions to be passed were to be distributed to the participants during the meeting, big posters were prepared to organise the voting on the resolutions, sufficient space for the speakers was to be left at the platform. Finally, the participants were called upon to return to their districts ‘in an orderly and peaceable manner’.[14]

The meeting on 24th October 1869 went according to plan. The newspapers

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13 *Bee-Hive*, 9 Apr. 1870, 120.

14 *Eastern Post*, 23 Oct. 1869, 5.

reported that the speeches were ‘studiously moderate in tone’, and the participants behaved in such a way that ‘the reserve force’ and ‘the military in the London garrison’, which had been put on alert, saw no reason to intervene.[15] In organising such ‘monster meetings’ cooperation with the police was so close that it was hard to bear for some observers. After a republican demonstration in 1873, a Conservative MP was deeply indignated that such a potentially seditious affair had been conducted ‘under the special protection of the police’ who had guaranteed a free passage of the procession through London.[16]

The description of such demonstrations seems to reaffirm the received cliché of a respectable working class in mid-Victorian Britain, a working class politically submissive to the norms of established middle-class culture and politics. This assumption also seems to be supported by the juxtaposition of ritual as counter-culture in the early nineteenth century with ritual as part of respectable politics in mid-Victorian times. However, the situation was more complicated than that. It would be wrong to assume a straightforward move from counter-culture at the beginning of the century to earnestness and respectability several decades later. The early-nineteenth-century radicals described by Epstein were eager to present themselves as earnest and respectable politicians; so did even some of the prophets, pornographers and underground radicals described by Iain McCalman in his enjoyable book on the ‘Radical Underworld’ of the early nineteenth century.[17] And as Nancy LoPatin showed, the reform agitators of the 1830s emphasised ‘that they represented a political community of some substance’, not a mass of seditious revolutionaries.[18] Thus, changes in the context within which ritual was displayed were more important than changes in the forms and substance of ritual itself. In public perception, comparable forms of ritual were subjected to differing interpretations during the course of the nineteenth century.

Before considering the factors that changed the context of ritual behaviour, it is therefore important to note that the shifts in the public perception of ritual and radicals’ behaviour along the ‘chronological’ axis did not mean that the polarity

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15 *Bee-Hive*, 30 Oct. 1869, 1.

16 *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 215, c. 269-70 (27 Mar. 1873).

17 Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld. Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge 1988).

18 Nancy D. LoPatin, 'Ritual, Symbolism, and Radical Rhetoric: Political Unions and Political Identity in the Age of Parliamentary Reform', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 3 (1998), 1-29, at 21.

between ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ behaviour was dissolved into a wholly ‘respectable’ prospect of radicalism. What happened is that public perception and radical behaviour combined in pushing the ‘unrespectable’ tradition from view. Many popular radicals were far from feeling obliged to conform to the assumed standards of political ‘respectability’. Andrew Whitehead saved from oblivion the Clerkenwell radical Daniel Chatterton who issued self-produced pamphlets calling for ‘the smashing up kings, priests, prigs, money-mongers’ [sic].[19] Speakers at smaller public meetings frequently excelled in abuse, obscenity and libelous accusations of the higher ranks of society. In the early 1870s, some orators from East London, who for a time held weekly meetings in Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park, were singled out in a police report for regularly violating ‘the bounds of most common decency’. The brave police officer complained that these orators abused ‘their betters ... in terms of the most filthy obscenity’. Even the language applied to the Queen would ‘befit a brothel’.[20] In protest against the enclosure of urban commons in the early 1870s, an agitator called John de Morgan went as far as to incite crowds of people to demolish and burn fences that had been freshly erected around spaces that had been open for public access before.[21]

The clash of different modes of expression constituted a serious challenge for the coherence of popular radicalism, and a deep faultline was revealed. In times of repression, such as the 1820s, the people’s modes of making themselves heard had to be manifold and colourful. ‘Serious’ politics merged with traditions of popular entertainment, caricature, obscenity, popular ballads, etc. – McCalman’s ‘radical underworld’. By mid-Victorian times, social and political acceptance of popular expression had grown – in many popular radicals’ perspective, there was no further need to move in a kind of political ‘underworld’ if the main challenge was to rise to positions of influence in the open political struggle.

The difficulties of bridging the gap opening up between different modes of expression can be noticed in the career of George W. M. Reynolds. In the 1860s,

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[19] Book advert in the *Republican Chronicle*, 1 May 1875, 13; Andrew Whitehead, 'Dan Chatterton and his "Atheistic Communistic Scorcher"', *History Workshop*, 25 (1988), 83-99.

[20] Summary of Police Reports registered in the Home Office, with reference to Political meetings held in the Metropolis, during the years 1867 to 1870 inclusive [31 Aug. 1871]. British Library, Gladstone Papers, Add. MS 44617.

[21] Antony Taylor, '"Commons-Stealers", "Land-Grabbers" and "Jerry-Builders": Space, Popular Radicalism and the Politics of Public Access in London, 1848-1880', *International Review of Social History*, 40 (1995), 383-407, at 401-2.

Reynolds was the influential editor of the best-selling popular Sunday newspaper, *Reynolds's News*. In Chartist times, he had made his name as a crowd agitator, but had started to tone down his utterances during the 1850s. But as Ian Haywood showed, Reynolds's journalism, full of titillating reports about the high and mighty, mystery stories and sentimentalism, was never fully accepted as 'serious' by a younger generation of popular radical leaders.[22] His particular blend of radicalism continued to be pushed to the margins by popular radicals who felt that the link between serious politics and carnivalesque or even vulgar forms of behaviour should be dissolved. While some editors of popular journals 'had no difficulty in combining the seriousness of the political sermon with the sensation of the latest scandal'[23], many leaders of popular radicalism expressed their reservations about a down-grading of radical aspirations of rational and respectable behaviour.

As a result, by the early 1870s the situation had become highly ambivalent. On the one hand, popular radical expression was never purged of unrespectable or outright 'vulgar' forms of behaviour. On the other hand, many popular leaders were extremely careful not to give up their claims to respectability. This renewed emphasis mainstream popular radicals placed on 'respectable' forms of expression in the early 1870s reflected a clear understanding of the impact all forms of public expression had on the perception of radical politics by the wider public and parliamentary politicians. Rituals such as public demonstrations which were meant to claim the public sphere for the people, had an immediate effect on the way in which popular radicalism was perceived by 'public opinion'. Therefore, the scope for popular political expression was defined by the limitations and myopias of public perception. In the last resort, the problematic nature of radical public expression was an immediate outcome of the incoherent stance of public opinion in general. Its emotional conflicts were nicely captured by Matthew Arnold in 1869: Although valueing the 'Englishman's heaven-born privilege' of free speech, public opinion could not help feeling confused about its own priorities 'when the man who gives an inflammatory lecture, or breaks down the park railings, or invades a Secretary of State's offices, is only following an Englishman's impulse to do as he likes; and our own conscience tells us that we

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22 Ian Haywood, 'George W. M. Reynolds and "The Trafalgar Square Revolution". Radicalism, the Carnivalesque and Popular Culture in Mid-Victorian England', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 7 (2002), 23-59.

23 Miles Taylor, *Ernest Jones, Chartism, and the Romance of Politics 1819-1869* (Oxford, 2003), 139.

ourselves have always regarded this impulse as something primary and sacred’.[24] Public opinion may have felt forced to accept popular public expression, but it did so with a considerable feeling of unease which often was directed at the outward forms of popular expression. Open-air meetings, for example, expressed the right of the people to be part of the public sphere in the most immediate and material form. As such, they had to be accepted by public opinion. And yet, they were a cultural form of politics that contrasted sharply with the established polity by constantly reaffirming fears of seemingly dangerous ‘masses’.[25] As late as 1872, George Odger observed that ‘genteel reformers’ regarded ‘open air meetings as vulgar things’.[26]

Beneath the public and radical discourse over the interpretation of ritual lay material changes in the political context in which ritual was displayed. As mentioned above, the early nineteenth-century ritual described by Epstein was a form of expression in times of repression. The mass of the people were excluded from most arenas of politics, at least at the national, parliamentary level. Political expression by the mass of the people was treated as illegitimate and seditious. By mid-century, the situation was changing. As Gareth Stedman Jones has argued, the abolition of the Corn Laws could be seen as a signal by the state that it cared for the needs of the wider mass of the people.[27] Politically, hopes grew for an inclusion of wider sections of the population into the official political sphere, for example by an extension of the franchise. William Ewart Gladstone encouraged these hopes when he gave his famous speech in 1864, proclaiming that every rational, respectable man should be ‘morally entitled to come within the pale of the Constitution.’[28]

The more the state seemed to offer an extension of citizenship to wider sections of the people, the more popular radicals felt moved to conform to the ruling standards of politically respectable behaviour. As Keith McClelland has shown, by the 1860s it had become a main interest of popular radicals to present

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[24] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge 1963), 105, 77 (originally 1869).

[25] Philip Howell, '"Diffusing the Light of Liberty": The Geography of Political Lecturing in the Chartist Movement', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 21 (1995), 23-38.

[26] *Bee-Hive*, 16 Nov. 1872, 11.

[27] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class. Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge 1983), 168-78.

[28] *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 175, c. 324 (11 May 1864).

themselves and 'the people' they claimed to represent as rational and respectable men who well deserved the franchise and who could be relied upon to make responsible use of it.[29] After the Reform Act of 1867, most popular radicals were eager to continue this course which also offered the chance of closer cooperation with the radical wing of the Liberal Party.[30]

If it was the state's offer of inclusion that caused popular radicals to emphasise their seriousness and respectability, a more sinister aspect must not be neglected; to a notable degree, their considerations were also motivated by fear. To many of them, the calm and peaceful situation appeared treacherous. A look into the history of the democratic movement in Britain seemed to prove that you could never be sure that the state might not choose to crack down on popular initiatives if they were perceived as a revolutionary attack on the established order. The lessons of Chartism they drew forced popular movements to proceed in a cautious and respectable manner. If they left this course, the danger of government repression always loomed in the offing. As early as 1858, John Baxter Langley warned that radicals had to reckon with a politics of 'reaction' all the time.[31] The people's freedom, though secure at first sight, could constantly be endangered if a cautious course was not pursued. The mentioning of the 'military in the London garrisions' that had been on alert during the Fenian demonstration of 1869, unmistakeably had an ominous ring to it.[32]

Thus it was a blend of motives – inner conviction, state reformism and political caution – that engendered a change in the function of democratic ritual over the course of the nineteenth century. By the second half of the century, popular ritual was on its way to becoming an accepted part of political expression, under the crucial precondition that it conformed to certain standards of socially and politically acceptable behaviour.

This made for an ambivalent attitude of the wider public in the face of democratic ritual, an attitude that had an immediate impact on the shaping of radical public expression. Forms of ritual that supported a feeling of identity

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29 Keith McClelland, 'Rational and Respectable Men. Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain, 1850-1867', in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca 1996), 280-93.

30 Detlev Mares, *Auf der Suche nach dem 'wahren' Liberalismus. Demokratische Bewegung und liberale Politik im viktorianischen England* (Berlin 2002), 252-316.

31 Letter by John Baxter Langley to Joseph Cowen, 9 April 1858. Tyne and Wear Archives, Newcastle, Cowen Papers.

32 *Bee-Hive*, 30 Oct. 1869, 1.

within popular radicalism might be rejected by public opinion. This constellation reflected back into popular radicalism; the proper use of ritual became a hotly contested terrain within strategic considerations in the first half of the 1870s.

II.

A closer look at one particular public meeting will help to expose the diverging positions popular radicals held on the merits of certain forms of political expression in the early 1870s. According to one newspaper account, the example chosen here was ‘one of the most noisy meetings’ in London for several years. It took place at St. James’s Hall in April 1871, convened by a number of radical MPs to protest against the ‘unconstitutional’ policy of the House of Lords. The upper chamber had just rejected a bill passed by the Commons (the Deceased Wife’s Sisters’ Bill), invoking the ire of parliamentary and extraparliamentary radicals alike. The meeting was meant to support the claim to primacy of the House of Commons as the people’s chamber and to call for a restriction in the Lords’ power of veto. However, the proceedings took an unexpected turn. When the chairman, Thomas Chambers MP, set out to explain the purpose of the gathering, ‘the word “Republic” was uttered in an upper part of the building, and in the top gallery a scarlet flag was waved, and the word “Republic” displayed’. A row followed, the flag and the banner were torn down. When a prepared resolution was moved, calling for a limitation of the Lords’ power of veto, parts of the audience demanded the outright abolition of the House of Lords. The meeting broke up in confusion, amid an array of proposed resolutions, amendments and cries for a republic.[33]

Obviously, the conflicting claims voiced at the meeting reveal programmatic or ideological differences between various strands of radicalism; the call for a limitation of the Lords’ powers was confronted by the demand for an abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. More interesting than the meeting itself, however, are the reactions it effected in the popular radical press and among popular radical associations. One day after the meeting, a gathering of London republicans condemned ‘the conduct of certain men exhibiting red flags and caps of liberty’.[34] For the former Chartist and republican H. V. Mayer from Dudley, the occurrences at St. James’s Hall seemed ‘criminally senseless’. Presenting red flags and wearing red caps at meetings that were not convened for voicing republican demands he called a ‘masquerade’. In his opinion, such

[33] *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 9 Apr. 1871, 6.

[34] *The Times*, 6 Apr. 1871, 5.

behaviour risked giving republicanism a reputation of ‘rowdyism and obstruction’.[35]

Since this criticism came from radical circles with impeccable republican credentials, it is clear that it was not the anti-monarchical attitude of parts of the audience at the St. James’s Hall meeting that caused offence. Instead, it was the legitimacy and advisability of using particular forms of symbolic expression which were at issue. Two sets of ritual had been merged that did not seem to fit together. On the one hand, there was the public meeting with its carefully crafted programme, prepared resolutions and fixed list of speakers, ranging from radical MPs to supporting acts by popular radicals. On the other hand there were the display of red flags and banners as well as shouts from the gallery, forms of expression presented as obstructionism and rowdyism by the critics. At first sight, all seems to point to a clash between the ever-existing rivals of ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ radicalism. And yet, the vehement reaction of radicals such as H. V. Mayer is remarkable and urges the question: Why this furore among popular radical leaders at this particular point in time? The answer emerges from a variety of accumulating reasons.

First of all, radical leaders had always been annoyed if unruly behaviour seemed to undercut attempts at ostentative display of political respectability and responsibility. The tone of meetings and resolutions from popular activists in the northern and eastern parts of London had angered George Howell, a well-known trade union official and working-class liberal, as early as 1869. In his diary, he famously complained about the ‘wild conduct of the generality of the Holborn men’.[36] In a letter of April 1871, he added that such ‘vapourings will do more to retard the progress of true Democracy than we shall be able to get over for years’.[37]

A second factor causing calls for caution was republicanism itself. In a period when many democrats placed their hopes for political progress on the Gladstonian Liberal Party, republicanism tended to sever any carefully established links to mainstream liberalism. Apart from criticism of the monarch by a few young parliamentary radicals, such as Charles Dilke, republicanism remained outside the pale of constitutionalist thought in Victorian Britain. Since it never managed to enter parliamentary politics to any notable degree, popular

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35 *Republican*, 1 May 1871, 6 (Letter to the Editor).

36 Howell Diary, 12 Dec. 1869. Bishopsgate Institute, London, Howell Collection.

37 Letter by Howell to Edmond Beales, 10 Apr. 1871. Bishopsgate Institute, London, Howell Collection.

radicals eager to establish networks with Liberal Party representatives were in no position to express republican sympathies, even if they might harbour them in secret (as even George Howell may have done sometimes). As long as it did not shape the public face of popular radicalism, leaders such as Howell might just turn a blind eye on republican sentiment. Yet a republicanism that raised its voice at the very meetings that were meant to cement the cooperation of popular and parliamentary radicals was bound to be a provocation of the highest order and opened up a gulf in the strategic conceptions of different strands of popular radicalism.

Moreover, as the statements by H. V. Mayer show, British republicans themselves were divided in questions of strategy and ideology. Mayer’s understanding of republicanism drew on the ideas of Thomas Paine whose criticism of monarchy and whose demands for the rights of man inspired British republicans throughout the nineteenth century. Paineite republicanism found its institutional base in the secularist (and often atheist) movement led by Charles Bradlaugh, who in the 1860s emerged as the most prominent freethinker with a large working-class following.[38] But Paine did not only provide the ideology of republicanism – he also fundamentally influenced its tone and ethos. Republicans in the Paineite vein placed great store on human rationality which was to find its expression in sober, earnest, and respectable behaviour. This tendency contrasted sharply with the tradition characterised as ‘crude republicanism’ by the historian Antony Taylor. This tradition was not so much interested in systematic argument; instead, it was ‘disrespectful and insulting, it gloated over royal tragedies and the personal misfortunes of Britain’s rulers’.[39] It was the tradition informing the emergence of a republican mass-movement in the late 1860s whose growth had been prompted by a rise of anti-monarchist critique after Queen Victoria’s withdrawal from public life in the wake of Prince Albert’s death. The number of clubs and republican gatherings increased, and much to the dismay of ‘Paineite’ republicans such as Charles Bradlaugh, George Odger or H. V. Mayer, ‘carnivalesque’ forms of expression returned to the platforms with

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38 David Nash, 'Secularism in the City: Geographies of Dissidence and the Importance of Radical Culture in the Metropolis', in Matthew Cragoe, Antony Taylor (eds.), *London Politics, 1760-1914* (Basingstoke 2005), 97-120; Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester 1974).

39 Antony Taylor, *'Down with the Crown'. British Anti-Monarchism and Debates about Royalty since 1790* (London 1999), 91, 65.

renewed vigour.[40]

To moderate popular radicals, the situation seemed even worse than that. Bound up with the rise of ‘crude republicanism’ were calls for a land reform. Harmless as this may sound at first hearing, to many contemporary observers ideas of land reform came close to calls for social revolution. By touching property rights, any demand for a redistribution of land from the aristocracy to the poor was perceived as a threat to social stability. In the early 1870s, land reform was a subject much-debated among respected radical thinkers and economists, such as John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett.[41] But by moving down the social scale to democratic clubs in the East End, the issue quickly aroused fears of dreadful Socialism. This impression was exacerbated when land reform ideas and republicanism left the closed atmosphere of radical guesthouses and went public with displays of red caps, flags and banners. Instantly, this kind of ‘red’ symbolism evoked associations of social levelling, violent revolution and mob rule, of ‘blood and slaughter’.[42] When a so-called Land and Labour League, with a programme demanding land nationalisation, was established in Holborn and the East End of London in 1869[43], many democratic leaders hesitated to give full support. Howell’s complaint about the ‘Holborn men’ was mainly directed at the members of this association.

This display of differences inside popular radicalism does not yet fully explain why it was in the early months of 1871 that ritual became the centreground for the struggle between different strategic options inside popular radicalism. This particular constellation was due to an outside impulse. In March 1871, the Commune had been proclaimed in Paris. Democrats, especially supporters of a republic, found themselves associated in public with the images of wild and unruly revolution emerging from Paris. The revolutionary programme of the Commune, the bloody war it had to fight in order to defend itself, the killings of hostages during the desperate final stages of the Commune – all this was closely reported and debated in the British press. Was the same to happen to Britain as well? All of a sudden, an ominous society called the International Working

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40 Mares, *Suche*, 232-44.

41 David E. Martin, *John Stuart Mill and the Land Question* (Hull 1981); Margot Finn, *After Chartism. Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge 1993), 267-71; Antony Taylor, *Lords of Misrule: Hostility to Aristocray in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-century Britain* (London 2004).

42 *Red Republican*, 22 June 1850, 5.

43 Mares, *Suche*, 47-60.

Men’s Association – all but ignored by the British press after its inception in 1864 – seemed to emerge as a universal instigator of revolution, operating from a base in the very heart of London.[44] Public suspicion grew, authorities were alarmed – and so were the popular radical leaders who felt they could no longer ignore tendencies of red republicanism or revolutionism if they did not want to endanger the very survival of their own political aims and associations. Their nervousness grew. ‘Carnivalesque’ or irrespectable forms of ritual, never much appreciated by the mainstream radical leaders in the first place, became the location for the struggle over the right strategy for democratic politics since they seemed to tarnish the public face of popular radicalism. The element of fear and insecurity, always present in popular radicalism after the end of Chartism, came to the fore. When H. V. Mayer was enraged about the display of red flags and rowdyism at the meeting for a reform of the House of Lords, it was from the knowledge that Chartism had ‘suffered from a similar policy’ and had ended in failure both from inanition and suppression. Mayer now was afraid that ‘Republicanism [would] share a similar fate’.[45]

Leading republicans urged caution. George Odger repeated his calls to keep republican public expression ‘conformable and tasteful to English feeling and aspirations’.[46] What this might mean was spelled out by Charles Bradlaugh. He implored his followers to stick to ‘moral means’ and to concentrate their campaign for a republic on a repeal of the Act of Settlement. In this way, he hoped to square the circle of expressing republican sentiments and of keeping the movement within the bounds of constitutional politics. The less the republican campaign was associated with red flags and banners, the better it seemed to him.[47]

The effect of Odger’s and Bradlaugh’s strategy was double-edged. On the one hand, they succeeded in keeping their movement within strictly legal bounds. For example, when in February 1872 a sympathy demonstration was organised in support of Charles Dilke and his republican leanings, the organising committee took great care that ‘no person should be allowed to move, second, or support any of the resolutions whose name had not previously received the sanction of the Committee’. Several days before the demonstration, the Committee was

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44 Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement. Years of the First International* (London 1965).

45 *Republican*, 1 May 1871, 6 (Letter to the Editor).

46 *Bee-Hive*, 25 Mar. 1871, 4.

47 *The Times*, 12 May 1873, 12.

proud to announce that 500 people had enlisted as volunteers to watch over the orderly proceedings at the meeting.[48]

On the other hand, in this way radical ritual was forced into a straightjacket of organisation meant to preclude any unwanted display of public 'disorder' or allusions to revolution. More spontaneous forms of expression were marginalised, disapproved of, even disavowed. The consequences for the budding republican mass-movement of the early 1870s were fatal. Many followers had been moved into action less by precise political analysis than by a vague feeling that something simply had to happen, 'and if it was only [the] pulling down of Hyde Park Railings'.[49] Such inchoate motives for action did not inspire patience, and they were rather unfavourable to a long-term time-frame for radical political action. Disappointment grew about the popular leaders' refusal to support the spontaneous ways of expression adopted by many republicans. By 1873, the republican movement had all but ceased to exist as a mass-movement. With an eye on Bradlaugh, a disenchanted democrat from Sheffield felt 'sick of all those time serving, expediency parroting flunkeys'.[50] By this time, it was too late already. Republicanism had withdrawn into the secluded circles of secularist clubs, never to emerge as a mass-movement again. Instead, popular radicalism moved into the direction of a close cooperation between working-class radicals and the Liberal Party. This so-called 'Lib-labism' was successful in enabling the first members from the working class to be elected into Parliament, among them George Howell.[51] Yet during the 1870s and 1880s it precluded the establishment of an independent, popular radical or working-class party. The struggles over ritual in the early 1870s took place at a time when the future direction of popular radical politics was decided, and ritual was one location where this struggle was fought out. The unrespectable tradition survived. But it never managed to influence the evolution of popular radicalism again.

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48 *Bee-Hive*, 3 Febr. 1872, 10 (Committee Meeting for Dilke Demonstration).

49 *International Herald*, 30 Nov. 1872, 7 (Letter to the Editor).

50 Letter by Joseph Brown to Samuel Vickery, 11 June 1873. International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Hermann-Jung-Collection.

51 John Shepherd, 'Labour and Parliament: The Lib.-Labs. as the First Working-Class MPs, 1885-1906', in Eugenio F. Biagini, Alastair J. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism. Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge 1991), 187-213.

III.

The sorry fate of mid-Victorian republicanism is one example for the importance of strategy for the prospects of a reforming movement. In this respect it does not differ from many other political movements, most notably its precursor, Chartism. As Martin Hewitt showed for Manchester, it was ‘changes in working-class strategic consciousness’ that were crucial for the ‘demobilisation of working-class radicalism in the post-chartist period’.[52] What is noteworthy in the case of mid-Victorian republicanism is the extent to which decisions over strategy were bound up with debates about the proper use of ritual inside popular radical circles. Radicals held no doubts about the legitimacy and importance of public ritual. However, this very expression was deemed problematic for strategic reasons. The debates on republican ritual in the early 1870s suggest that the strategic dimension in the employment of particular forms of ritual might be a worthwhile subject of study in its own right, moving the historians’ perspective away from the concentration on the identity-function of ritual.

Certainly, some basic aspects shaping the debate over ritual in mid-Victorian republicanism may seem trivial, such as the faultline opening up between the interests of the leaders of a mass-movement and the motivations of their followers. This constellation is anything but singular to this time and place. However, consideration of this faultline serves to explain a very specific phenomenon: the swift demise of a mass-movement that only seemed to be in its infancy but whose time was over before it even had the chance to establish a more stable institutional base.

In addition, the survey of popular radical ritual suggests that we must not fall prey to an easy chronology of ritual or to simplifying classifications of respectable and unrespectable behaviour. Ritual in its functions and contents was malleable and flexible. It might change its outward form and keep its inner substance, or it might stay the same outwardly, but mean different things in different times and contexts. One element that *did* change over time was the increasingly relaxed attitude of the state and society towards displays of democratic ritual. However, a large degree of ambivalence remained, and popular radicals could never be sure how far this relaxation went and whether it would hold in the face of unruly crowds. Moderate radical leaders remained very hesitant about testing the limits of the possible and acceptable. To act cautiously

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52 Martin Hewitt, The *Emergence of Stability in the Industrial City. Manchester, 1832-67* (Aldershot 1996), 230-261, quote 261.

was to be on the safe side in this situation. Thus, caution and respectability became instrumental in shaping the development of radical ritual in the second half of the century. They may also have been instrumental in guaranteeing that democratic activities tended to remain the concern of a minority of political activists – control and public order probably were not what most people expected from a day out at the barricades.

Zitation des Beitrags entsprechend der Buchausgabe:

Detlev Mares: 'Criminally senseless'. Ritual and Political Strategy in Mid-Victorian Popular Radicalism, in: Jörg Neuheiser / Michael Schaich (Hgg.): Political Rituals in Great Britain 1700-2000, Augsburg 2006 (= Arbeitskreis Deutsche England-Forschung, Bd. 55), S. 75-91.