

Speaking for the People. Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914

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In the last two decades the history of modern British politics has been the subject of fierce debate as its long cherished narratives and explanatory models have been questioned from a variety of 'revisionist' perspectives. In the proliferation of work that has followed (who on earth can keep up with the books publishers, authors and reviewers proclaim as essential), we have been left with something approaching a historiographical Babel in which historians often talk past each other as they tell competing stories in different tongues. Among many others, narratives of class formation, the rise of party, electoral reform and ideological continuity are articulated and contested from a plethora of methodological positions ranging from an agnostic empiricism or a common sense materialism to various linguistic or postmodern turns. In such a congested and contested field most mix their metaphors and struggle to keep their head above water. Only the brave or foolhardy dare seek to make sense of it all, let alone seek to tell a new story in a new way.

In *Speaking for the People*, Jon Lawrence tries to do both. As one of the most interesting and imaginative British political historians currently at work, he is better equipped than the rest of us to pull this off. Given that this book was a long time in the making, he has been helped too by being able to rehearse several of its arguments elsewhere - although he adds a few more for good measure. If, as we shall see, it does not always add up to the sum of its parts and is, like the politics whose history Lawrence writes, full of ambiguities and tensions, it remains a remarkably dense, suggestive, bold and ambitious book which deserves wide and careful attention from all those interested in the social and political histories of 19th and 20th century Britain.

Significantly, Lawrence is at pains to eschew what he sees as the dogmatic and imperious tones of others' "strident interventions" (53) for the rhetoric of subjectivity and provisionality. Thus the book begins with an account of the stories through which Lawrence has understood his own and his family's experience of the relationship between class, locality and party politics in order to situate the specificity of his reading of the past. And later, when outlining his project, he declares that it should not be read "as a declaratory manifesto for historical 'best practice' but as a brief outline of the assumptions and influences which have helped shape the substantive study of English popular politics that follows" (61).

This is, of course, all rather disingenuous, for quite rightly he has a project which he believes provides a more accurate reading of the past than those he critically engages with. No surprise then that he quickly adopts the declaratory rhetoric earlier decried, demanding that others "must focus ... on" (61), "must seek to ..." (62), "The task for studies of popular politics is to ..." (62), "What we need is ..." (63) and so on. No surprise then that the early atmosphere of equanimity is soon disturbed by dismissive glancing references to the work of particular protagonists as well as to whole approaches (my favourite being the "limited horizons and self-contained logic" of high politics (62)).

So what is the project and the problematic it addresses? Lawrence's central concern is the relationship between political parties and those they claim to represent and speak for. As he succinctly puts it:

Put at its simplest, a principal argument of the book is that studies of popular politics must focus greater critical attention on the relationship between political activists, of whatever persuasion, and those they seek to represent politically. We must recognise that precisely because this relationship is one of 'representation' it must constantly be negotiated and renegotiated - the 'formal' politics of political organisations can never be a complete and faithful reflection of the interests (objectively *or* subjectively defined) of those who are represented ... In studying popular politics we are therefore studying the interaction between the world of 'formal' and 'informal' politics, conscious that the relationship between the two is never unmediated, and that our analysis must therefore always be sensitive to the tensions and ambiguities in the relationship between 'leaders' and 'led' (61).

He is perhaps especially interested in quite particular dimensions of this relationship; namely how parties claim to represent particular classes or localities and the processes of inclusion and exclusion inherently involved in constructing such constituencies.

Lawrence has two particular historiographical dragons he wants to lay to rest which he believes have done violence to the ambiguities and tensions involved in the relationship between parties and their publics. The first, and perhaps the most contentious, is the historiography of the rise of class; the second, the historiography of the rise of party. Both are seen not only to dominate accounts of popular politics in this period but to share a set of unhelpful teleological assumptions about the nature of political change.

Much of Part I of the book is devoted to a discussion of the historiography of class in order to refine its

materialist explanatory model and challenge its periodisation of political change. The first chapter demonstrates how by the 1970s an eclectic range of histories - Marxist, radical, liberal - shared remarkably similar accounts of how industrialisation had begot the rise of class, which in turn begot political change. In Chapter Two, he deploys this historiography's own social structural techniques to dispel the myth that the period 1880-1920 saw the emergence of a newly proletarianized, residentially and culturally homogenous, working class. His argument is not that we should dispense with materialist explanations of political change all together, just the cruder mechanical models currently on offer. The task at hand is then to explore the "non-reductionist and non-teleological" ways in which material factors "often shape both the terms upon which subordinate groups are able to act politically, and many of the fundamental concerns of the politics they embrace" (40).

Thus later, in what for many will constitute the substantive chapters on the politics of Wolverhampton, Lawrence is at pains to avoid social structural class explanations when examining the relative successes and failures of Conservative and Labour politics. In Chapter Five, the Tories' success in appealing to the town's manual workers is accredited to the populist languages and practices of Tory activists who embraced the pleasures of the people and the politics of nation and empire. In contrast, he suggests Labour was spectacularly unsuccessful in winning the support of the increasingly homogenous 'east end' working class community, gaining ground instead in the socially more heterogeneous northern and southern districts with a diffuse or inclusive rhetoric of the idle versus the productive, the people or the working classes. In Chapter 8, he returns again to this lack of fit between Labour's constituency of support and social structural explanations of class politics. "Labour politics", he insists, "were not simply the natural outgrowth of a more mature, assertive and homogenous working class" (160). I will return later to the tensions of Lawrence's own treatment of class, suffice it here to say that those seeking a return to class explanations of popular party politics will not find much comfort in this book.

Yet not content to uncouple the causal relationship between the rise of class and the rise of party, Lawrence sets out to unpick the widely held assumption that this period witnessed the triumph of party and its management or disciplining of popular politics. Throughout the book he emphasises the persistence of an anti-party spirit within popular politics, indeed perhaps even a heightening of it in the face of the increasing centralisation of party machinery at the national level. In Wolverhampton both Tory and Labour politics tap in to resentment of the local Liberal establishment and its domination of the party's (un)representative organisation. Indeed, a central theme of the book is difficulties faced by Labour politics in reconciling the suspicion of the way in which national organisations (especially the dreaded Liberal caucus) sought to control local politics with the need to construct a national movement.

Although increasing national party control was clearly distrusted, Lawrence also suggests such fear was misplaced for political parties were never entirely successful at incorporating or taming a sometimes unruly popular politics. In one of the most interesting chapters of the book, he argues that the need to win the support of voters usually took priority over trying to improve them. Consequently, at least until the First World War, popular politics remained a firmly manly environment where shows of strength and the politics of disruption remained paramount.

And, lastly, once the teleologies of the rise of class and party have been dispensed with, we are, Lawrence wants to suggest, left with the absolute centrality of the politics of place. The middle section of the book, Part II, is entirely devoted to an examination of the fabric of municipal and parliamentary politics in Wolverhampton in order to demonstrate not its representative nature but its peculiarities. Indeed, at times it appears as though he wants to use locality to replace class as the central explanatory model of politics. Thus in Chapter 6 he suggests the reason for Labour's failure to win over Wolverhampton's working class 'east end' was that its activists did not live there and therefore could not "claim to be rooted in these communities, to understand them from the inside" (132). A theme echoed later in Chapter 9 when he details Labour's reliance on outside 'carpet-bagger' parliamentary candidates as well as in the Conclusion's lament for Labour's "inability to exploit the 'politics of place'" (267).

It would be possible to provide challenges to many of the points Lawrence relies upon to elaborate his

critique of the rise of party and class and his insistence upon the centrality of place. However, as a way of opening up these questions I want to focus first on the internal coherence of his argument, or rather the apparent lack of it.

Let's start firstly with the issue of class. While Lawrence initially challenges the idea of growing working-class homogeneity in part by suggesting that "outside London there is very little to support arguments about 'the rise of the working-class neighbourhood' before the First World War" (35), we are later told that precisely such neighbourhoods existed in places like Wolverhampton's 'east end' and the coalfield communities of Durham or south Wales. Indeed, as we have seen, he suggests Labour's relative failure before the war was in failing to represent these very communities, or to make the most of the high levels of demographic stability evident in even socially more diverse city populations such as London and Liverpool.

Secondly, although Lawrence wants to contest any straightforward notion of the triumph of party, much of his argument relies upon documenting the growing distrust of the machinery of national party politics. Indeed, in many ways he simply pushes the triumph of party to a date (or rather various dates) beyond 1914 which then remain largely unexamined. Thus, while assuring us that he does "not wish simply to push forward the timing of the 'triumph of party' to after the First World War" he talks of "significant changes after 1918" (193), or of the completion of national party control within Labour politics by the 1920s (257), or of the nationalisation of Labour politics during World War Two (240). Similarly, having used the persistence of the politics of disruption to demonstrate the failure of parties to manage popular politics (although as he shows it was a tool of party politics), he suggests its eventual decline in between the wars (192). This makes sense, given that as he himself acknowledges in the Conclusion much of the discussion of Liberal and Labour politics usefully focuses on their ambivalence towards those they sought to represent; their desire to moralise, educate, even to tame, demos.

Lastly, we turn to the politics of place. Although I would heartily agree with his call "for extensive new research into the 'politics of locality' which recognises, rather than disguises, the peculiarities of place" (6), it seems a little disingenuous to suggest there has been a dearth of such work - it has surely remained the staple format for doctoral work. But the larger issue is whether Lawrence himself does justice to the peculiarities of place. The book is divided into three parts, of which the second part deals with Wolverhampton. It is excellent at showing the interstices of municipal and parliamentary politics and the peculiarities of the shifting alliances. Condensed from his 1989 PhD thesis there are three densely written and uneven chapters on Liberal, Conservative and Labour politics at particular times. The third part of the book returns to national trends and themes and arguably commits exactly the type of mistake Lawrence previously decries, namely "relying on whistle-stop tours of the country's archives" and picking out uncontextualised examples from apparently random geographical or chronological points to demonstrate the argument.

In the end the book singularly fails to move from the local to the national, the particular to the general, and show how the latter is more complicated and nuanced by the former. One can't help suspecting that the structure of the book says more about the economics and politics of academic publishing than about Lawrence's devotion to the politics of place.

I want to suggest that perhaps these tensions in the book's central arguments stem from Lawrence's ambitious, but ultimately flawed, attempt to outline what he appears to imply is a new methodology for political history. If I understand him correctly, and it is sometimes difficult as he conflates arguments about method with arguments about historiography (or particular interpretations), he wants to outline a position which acknowledges the central place of both the processes of representation and the material contexts in which they operate. Material factors shape the conditions of emergence for, or the form of, a subaltern politics; discursive resources shape the conditions of possibility, or the content, of that politics. In his mind this positions himself between the fundamentalists: the mechanical social structuralists on one side, and the 'postmodernist revisionists' (his term, not mine) on the other.

To my mind, as one of these so-called 'postmodernist revisionists', it seems a wildly uncontentious position - one that many of the supposed fundamentalists on both sides would agree with.

The difficulty is, of course, in the detail, in moving from the theoretical model to the historiographical practice. And it is here that I feel Lawrence's book is found wanting. It ends up not elaborating and illustrating the theoretical position he outlines, but reading as though it has been written by a schizophrenic. Let me try and illustrate how.

Much of the book is written as though class and locality are simple material realities, the product of socio-economic change. It is full of statistics and tables documenting the social composition and residential patterns of its objects of analysis. Chapter 6 is a good example. Here class is understood as stemming primarily from occupational status, and sub-divided into manual and non-manual work, with the latter category being sub-divided again into 'lower middle class' and 'substantial middle class' (134). Localities are places with discrete communities (conveniently coinciding with the boundaries of municipal wards or census enumerator returns [130-3] - with even sample streets subdivided accordingly [n.12 134]) - that labour activists are set apart from (130-3). As we shall see shortly, there are real problems with such an approach, but not only are these not addressed but it is plainly contradicted by those other parts of the book that deal with class and locality as discursive categories, actively constructed by political rhetoric. Conservative rhetoric appeals to the dignity of the working man (106-10), Labour to constituencies "such as 'the working class', 'the workers' and 'the people' (146); all political parties claim and contest the right to represent particular localities (165-7), the "politics of locality were made - they did not simply happen" (236).

A similar set of tensions is evident in Lawrence's reading of particular types of sources. As he shows in the excellent penultimate section of the book on the construction of a foundational mythology of Labour politics through the auto/biographies of early Labour leaders, he has a good eye for the narrative forms and tropes which shape so much of the source material for political history. And yet, he not only exercises this critical skill very rarely, but also insists upon the reading such accounts as simply descriptive, as corresponding to what actually happened instead of re-presenting them. As he surely knows, the tropes of leadership deployed by Labour leaders drew from long-established forms and genres in Radical and Liberal politics and the autobiographies of the labouring poor more generally. They have a history and their appropriation by Labour leaders meant that they emplotted and re-presented their lives through these forms.

I raise this point because it returns us to another, that is Lawrence's use of social surveys, census figures, government reports as unproblematic sources which correspond to the objective conditions of social life. While he chides others for taking "the rhetorical strategies of labour leaders for a faithful description of employer strategy" (29), he makes the same mistake when detailing the social structural constraints upon popular politics. Although he makes some qualifications regarding the accuracy of figures (eg.29), he seems blissfully unaware of the ways in which these types of source material were actively constituting the social domain. They were, what Mary Poovey has recently described in *Making a Social Body* as, the representational technologies through which the social domain was constituted as an object of rule. Far from innocently describing the world, they sought to construct 'society' in ways which made it amenable to these technologies of rule. There is another political history to be written here, one which like Poovey draws upon a Foucauldian analysis of liberal government.

(This is not to deny the importance of material realities or constraints upon subaltern politics. Given his disappointment at the way in the geography of Labour activism did not coincide with the geography of class, one material constraint Lawrence surprisingly neglects is the very great difficulties faced by working people in reconciling the demands of employers with the demands of municipal or parliamentary candidatures and election.)

I want to suggest that part of the reason Lawrence gets himself into such difficulties is that for his central thesis to work he has to be able to demonstrate that political parties misrepresent those they claim to speak for. This, of course, raises what Lawrence recognises to be the very thorny issue of reception, of how those

whom political parties spoke for felt about the manner of their representation (67-8). Although he outlines a theoretical way around this problem through attention to the forms and genres through which political discourses were disseminated and appropriated, it is not one that he ever takes up in the substantive analysis. Remarkably there is almost nothing on the dynamics of political communication: nothing on the forms and tropes of the press (surely a vital source of the construction of localities), nothing on oratory, nothing on ceremonial forms, nothing on the reshaping of civic spaces ... Instead he resorts to plan B - to reading the politics of disruption as resistance (while also, as we have seen, acknowledging its party political dimensions). So, while he denies the plausibility of measuring the objective interests of a social group ("we need to recognise that conceptions of 'interest', like many of the practices of popular politics, often predominate less because they reflect the immediate 'objective' interests of a social group, than because they are legitimated by past discourse and practices" 68), this is precisely what he ends up doing in terms of class and locality. How else can he bemoan that Labour activists were "only marginally more representative, in the literal sense, of the average working man, than the traditional party politician" (266).

Lawrence is on much surer ground when he discusses the exclusionary practices of party politics. He should be especially applauded on his careful attention to its gendered nature, many of the most illuminating passages are those that address the manliness of party political cultures. Given his strength in this area it is disappointing that he pays so little attention to questions of race, nation and empire. There is, for instance, no reference to the important work of Catherine Hall on the centrality of discourses of race and empire to debates around the 1867 Reform Act. Other important episodes where the history of metropolitan politics collide with the histories of race and empire are also ignored or fleetingly mentioned, one thinks obviously of Ireland but also the Bulgarian atrocities, the American Civil War, the Boer War, Jewish immigration, Chinese labour and so on. In short, there is no reckoning with a postcolonial perspective or the undoubted benefits it could bring to an often myopically English political history. And when we are on silences, the countryside and the politics of agricultural work does not get a look in, or an explanation for its absence.

These last few bleats aside, I have tried to do justice to the richness of Lawrence's thesis and to judge it on its own terms on the basis of its internal coherence. As I emphasised at the beginning of this review, I believe he has written an important book. To my mind its ambiguities and tensions make it a book that is good to think with. I hope that this review will prove an equally fruitful way of Lawrence to reassess his own work and the state of the field that is British political history.

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