The Methodist Church and the Clapham
Sects as Ideological Apparatuses

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Abstract: This article seeks to explore the contradictions of the Methodist Church and the Clapham sects as ideological apparatuses. Our major argument is that the Methodist and Clapham sects were established at the end of the eighteenth century in order to contain the poor and the labouring poor in the sphere of poverty by preaching to them subordination, hard work, discipline and thrift. However, contrary to the black-and-white picture often drawn by many scholars of the Methodist Church and Clapham sects, we also argue that they unintentionally fostered among the poor the skills of organisation and discipline, and contributed to the rise of the “condition-of-England-debate” among industrial and parliamentary reformers, a debate that ultimately resulted in the labour and parliamentary reforms in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Introduction: To have a clear idea about the issues of religion and poverty in the first decades of the nineteenth-century England, we need to go as far back as the eighteenth century, a period marked by an emphasis on logic and reason that characterized the Anglican Church. The role of religion, as an organized discipline, had dwindled, as the social functions it had once performed had been secularised. It was often guilty of smugness, inactivity and identification with a small ruling class though some of its members had tried to imbue it with a new life. Among these, there was John Wesley, the founding father of the Methodist movement, who tried to take religion to those whom the Church had neglected in the nascent industrial towns and
mining villages. In these industrial places lived a labouring population, cut off from its traditional, preindustrial way of life and forced into an alien and miserable one. This population was anxious, uncertain about the nature of existence and the chances of the future, and so were ready to believe in at least the possible existence of some source of extra-human power, which could be invoked in the hope of limiting poverty, insignificance, suffering and fear. Taking our bearings from Louis Althusser’s theory of “ideological apparatuses”, we would argue that the Methodist Church and the Clapham sects were not established with the sole purpose of giving a meaning to the existence of the poor, but to contain them within the sphere of poverty. We would also argue that as ideologies they were undermined by contradictions that resulted in the construction of a powerful labour movement and the launching of political and socio-economic reforms.

**The Poor and the Wealthy in the Methodist Church and the Clapham Sects’s System of Beliefs**

It was the context depicted above that greatly facilitated, if not urged, the distressed population to embrace Methodism, the message of which is captured in the following religious poem on the necessity of redemption:

Outcasts of men, to you I call,  
Harlots, and publicans, and thieves!  
Sinners alone his grace receives:  
No need for him the righteous have;  
He came the lost to seek and save.  
Come, o my guilty brethren, come,  
Groaning beneath your load of sin!  
His bleeding heart shall make you room  
His open side shall take you in;  
He calls you now, invites you home:  
Come, o my guilty brethren, come.  
(Quoted in Thompson, E.P, 1984:40)

John Wesley, an outstanding figure of the Methodist trend, was so ecumenical in his religious ideas that he let the doors wide
open to any convert, imposing no restrictions whatsoever. “Methodists”, he reassured, his followers
do not impose [...] any opinions whatever. Let them hold particular or general redemption, absolutes or conditional decrees; let them be churchmen or Dissenters, Presbyterians or independents, it is no obstacles [...] the independent or Anabaptist [may] use his own mode of worship; so may the Quaker, and none will contend with him about it [...] one condition, and one only, is required, a real desire to save their souls. (Ibid., 41)

We would argue that through this policy, the Methodist church challenged the Anglican Church that largely depended for its functioning on its converts’ financial duties. The payment of duties to the Established Church was deeply resented, and was often an object of complaint. By relieving the growing population of the emerging industrial cities of the financial burden, “Methodist ministers,” as Roy Porter tells us in *English Society in the 18th Century*, “escaped the obloquy of being parasitic tithe gatherers. (1991:178)” Obviously, Methodism was a religion for the poor because it was established to cater to the spiritual needs of a population, whose wages were barely sufficient to satisfy their material existence. As the following poem by Wesley’s brother, Charles, makes it clear, the Methodist Church appealed to the poor as God’s chosen people:

The rich and great in every age
Conspire to persecute their God.
Our Saviour by the rich unknown
Is worshipped by the poor alone. (1984:176)

In the Established Church the poor, who constituted the greater part of society, were told that they were placed under the superintendence and patronage of the rich by divine decree rather than human contrivance. In other words the wealthy were charged by natural providence as much as by revealed appointment with the care of the poor. (Briggs Asa, 1986)
Instead of elevating the rich into the poor’s trustees, Wesley provided an organization in which the poor could do without the well-off through thrift, abstinence and hard work. These values would supposedly turn a Methodist into a rich man, but if he got wealthy, he would again be a sinner. Paradoxically, Godliness would lead to hard work, which would lead to wealth, and which in its turn would lead to ungodliness. On the basis of this paradoxical thinking Wesley advises his followers to accept their fate:

The Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionally increase in pride, in anger, in the desire the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. (Quoted in Plumb, J.H, 1990:97)

Obviously, wealth for Wesley is rather sinful for his followers, the poor. They were born to be the eternal needy toilers who would never enjoy the fruit of their labour or better themselves.

The Methodists’ vision of the poor revealed its striking contribution to the foundation of industrial society; it was a nursing ground for the proletariat which greatly benefited the manufacturers. According to E.P. Thompson,

Methodism may be seen as a simple extension of the [Puritan] ethic in a changing social milieu; and an “economist” argument lies to hand, in the fact that Methodism, in Bunting’s day, proved to be exceptionally well adapted, by virtue of its elevation of the values of discipline and of order as its moral opacity, both to self-made mill-owners and manufacturers. (1984:390)

To inculcate the principle of work discipline among the preindustrial workers, so that they could integrate the factory system, Methodism advocated the sanctity of work. The labouring poor were made to believe that grace was provisory and conditional, and it lasted as long as they did not slide back to laziness or pretention to wealth. The relapse from work in both
conditions was regarded as really sinful. The major argument was that labourers should not expect earthly rewards. Wealth, like poverty, is ephemeral. What mattered most was the afterlife for which they should sacrifice earthly rewards. E.P. Thompson’s critique of the Methodist sect’s ideology may be illuminating in many a respect:

The factory system demands a transformation of human natural, the “working paroxysms” of the artisan or overlooked must be Methodised until the man is adapted to the discipline of the machine […] it can only be by inculcating “the first and great lesson […] that man must expect his chief happiness, not in the present, but in a future state”. Work must be undertaken as a “pure act of virtue” […] inspired by the love of a transcendent, being operating on our will and affection. (Ibid: 318)

It has always been widely acknowledged that Methodism was the chief influence that prevented England from starting along the path of revolution in the 1790s. As French Jacobinism increasingly gained ground on the English side of the Channel, the Methodist Church came to the rescue of the established order by providing the ideological means of making it unpopular. Methodists associated the French Revolution with “Deists and Atheists”. Being a Tory himself and deeply conservative in his political ideas, Wesley claimed that “The greater the share people have in government, the less liberty, civil or religious, does a nation enjoy” (Quoted in Plumb, J.H, 1990:94). So, if democracy, as advocated by the French Revolutionists and circulated in England by Thomas Paine in his famous essay entitled The Rights of Man, was left to induce people’s involvement in government, it would bring havoc on the principle of subordination at the core of Wesley’s spurious conception of political freedom. Clearly, Wesley was inhabited by the fear that the empowerment of the lower orders through revolution would be his class’s loss. In other words, it was a
matter of conflicting interests of democracy and aristocracy. This was echoed by Reverend Jabez Banting, a Methodist minister who took the lead of the movement after Wesley’s death in 1791, when he declared that democracy was as hateful as sin.

One of the worst counts against Methodism is their conviction that children were sinful, and therefore, should be tamed at an early age. The taming operation should be conducted by means of Sunday Schools, where children underwent indoctrination in order to hammer them into the right ideological shape and make them fit into the new industrial system. This educational policy, as Mary Fletcher, a Methodist school mistress, writes it, aims to turn children into useful servants. That is why “we [Methodist educators] never use the term play, nor suffer any to give those toys or playthings, which children are usually brought up to spend half their time. (Quoted in Ibid., 1991: 166)” This type of discourse betrays the Methodists’ intent to subjugate children, and make of them disciplined would-be labourers.

The aim of the Sunday Schools was to keep the young learners in their appointed sphere of life and to train up a submissive generation. For the Methodists, a liberal education for the poor would be rather harmful for society. Davies, a Methodist influential figure, argued that:

Giving education to the labouring classes or the poor would be prejudicial to their moral and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture and other laborious employment. Instead of teaching the subordination, it would render them fractious and refractory. (Quoted in Plumb J.H., 1991: 165)

Such an ideology largely explains why the children who quitted Sunday schools at the time remained mostly as illiterate as they
had entered them. Most of them did not even acquire some of the educational basics, such as the R’s Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Writing was even considered as sinful because it was looked as a worldly employment and a secular that encouraged thinking and therefore insubordination. On the whole, the ruling class, with the complicity of the Methodist Church, did not want to turn the poor into an intellectual proletariat capable of disturbing the established social order. They were frightened at the idea of democratisation of political life because secular writing or even secular reading would allow the imagination of the future working men to run free and throw off their yoke.

The Ideological Contradictions of the Methodist Church and the Clapham Sects

However, though many scholars have attributed much of the harm done to the poor and the labouring poor to the nineteenth-century Methodism, it would be misleading to ignore the unintentional improvements it entailed to them. Unwillingly - or else in spite of it but not because of it- Methodism instilled in its followers the principles of discipline and organization which greatly benefited them. Robert Southey, a contemporaneous literary figure in his Letters From England writes that “Perhaps the manner in which Methodism has familiarized the lower classes to the work of combining in associations making rules for their own governance, raising funds, and communicating from one part of the kingdom to another, may be reckoned among the incidental evils which have resulted from it. (Quoted in Thompson  E.P., 1984:46).” Clearly, the Methodists’ discipline and organization initially meant to tame the bodies of the poor to the service of their “betters” turned out to be an advantage to the
labouring poor when the time came to struggle for their rights in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Another of this sect’s ‘inadvertences’ was the democratic spirit that it managed to propagate in society despite the fact that it was loathed and fought against. The spiritual egalitarianism Wesley preached, persuading the poor that their souls were as good as aristocrats’ and bourgeois’ souls ended up in unexpected and unwanted consequences. This simply gave birth to a first schism in the sect, which culminated in the formation of a subsect whose members were known as “Tom Paine Methodists” and the “Primitive Methodists”. The latter sect was a nursing ground for radicals and trade unionists. Those Methodists who seceded were the elite, who knew of the orthodox Methodist’s true aims and philosophy. All along the Industrial Revolution, recalcitrant, rebel Methodists filled the ranks of the Luddites, trade unionists and Chartists. The gradual evolution of the sense of reaction against Methodism in the ranks of labourers is well expressed in the following words by Thompson: “There were a few Methodist Jacobins, more Methodist Luddites, many Methodist weavers demonstrating at Peterloo, Methodist trade unionist and Chartists”. (Ibid: 433).

The other sect which took to Evangelical Revivalism was the Clapham Sect, led by William Wilberforce and Hannah More. What Wesley had done to the poor, the members of this sect tried to accomplish with the rich. Wilberforce sought to reform the manners of the upper classes saying that “God has set before me as my object the reformation of my country’s manners”. For the Clapham Sect, the upper classes’ reformed manners were the panacea for national public morality. In this regard, Hannah More claimed that “Reformation must begin with the Great, or it will never be effectual. Their example is the
fountain whence the vulgar draw their habits, actions and characters. To expect to reform the poor while the opulent are corrupt is to throw odours into the stream while the springs are poisoned.” (http://Victorian.lang;Nagoya.u.ac.jp/Victorian_web/religion/herb5) The aim of the “Saints as the Evangelicals came to be known, was to re-Christianise the “Great”, fitting them for their duty of leadership in society. More’s call for a hierarchical order in society found a favourable echo amongst a certain rising middle class, since this justified its exploitation of the lower class members.

Addressing herself to the poor, More gave her discourse another orientation. She advocated resignation, subordination and industry. In her pamphlet, “Half a Loaf Is better Than No Bread,” she declares:

And though I’ve no money, and tho I’ve no lands. I’ve a head on my shoulders and pair of good hands. So I’ll work the whole day, and on Sundays I’ll seek at church how to bear all the wants of the weak. The gentle folks too will afford us supplies. They’ll subscribe-and they’ll give up their pudding and pies. (Quoted in Porter Roy, 1991: 354)

The poor, then, should be kept in the station which God had allotted them. This shows that the Evangelicals of the Clapham Sect, unlike the Methodists, who were more or less for an egalitarian society, did not wish to abolish the distinction between the rich and the poor by questioning social hierarchies.

The Clapham Sect’s attitude towards the poor and the labouring poor’s plight became known to the public when Prime Minister William Pitt made the combinations of workers illegal in 1799-1800. Though Wilberforce was the instigator of the anti-slavery campaign, he did little or nothing to give a hand in the hardships encountered by the English workers, whom Oasler named the ‘White Slaves’ at the time. Even worse, he considered their combinations as a disease (Brian Inglis, 1972: 115). Arguably, in defending such a view, Wilberforce meant to support William Pitt’s political decision and to safeguard the interests of his fellow higher class members.
It has to be observed that the condition-of-England debate was conducted by the theorists of the capitalist systems like Adam Smith on the one hand, and the factory system and parliamentary reformers, and the working class radicals on the other. Until very recently, late-eighteenth and first-half-of-the nineteenth-century England cuts a small figure in comparison with France and Germany when it comes to speak about freedom. So the “condition of England Debate” has rarely been investigated from the philosophical point of view to see to what extent it created a discursive space for talking about the meaning of freedom. The authoritarian theological discourse developed by the Methodists and Clapham sects shifted into a philosophical discourse elaborated by the factory system and parliamentary reformers and working class radicals working in response to the normative rules set mostly by the political economists. This philosophical dimension involves whether the contractual system of free labour and other liberal ideas really foster the freedom of the working class, the poor and laboring poor, who sell their workforce to factory owners are really free. The second assumption is that the discourse of the debate like any discursive system is circulated in the form of dominant metaphors or tropes chosen according to their degree of circulation in the English society of the time.

Catherine Gallagher (1988) has identified three major metaphors in the discourse of the condition of England debate. One these is that of the laboring poor/ slave metaphor that played a central role in the discourse of the proslavery and antislavery protagonists at the turn of the eighteenth century. According to historians, it is industrialism that brought out the rise and fall of the slavery in the West. The merchants started it when they needed the accumulation of capital and the industrialists their historical inheritors wanted it to die when it became no longer profitable for them. Under the theorists of capital, “free labour” was adopted in the form of contracts between factory owners and the poor working class. The debate was whether the white English laboring poor were really free as the black slave emancipators claim in their support of the new economic system, or whether this rhetoric of freedom is just an ideological justification for an equally enslaving system. In the rhetoric of the proslavery proponents, the working and living conditions of the laboring poor in England was no better, if not worse, than those of the black slaves in their plantations. The paradox in this discourse over what constitutes “free labour” is that the English worker/slave metaphor was deployed by industrial reformers and social critics with ambivalence. For example, in debunking the idea of “free labour” and the liberal economic model of freedom,
which as we said above was first employed by those industrialists who wanted to promote a more profitable system, such social critics as William Cobbett finished by developing a racist rhetoric. On the contrary, abolitionist social critics like Robert Owen deployed the same metaphor in their criticism of the factory system in an attempt to redirect the humanitarian sentiments that the metaphor raised during the abolitionist period towards the denunciation of the oppressiveness of the factory system.

We would argue that whether in the hands of the factory system and parliamentary reformers and radicals, the slave/master metaphor was deployed in defence of regulating the excesses of the capitalist system at both the economic and political level. Independently of the ideological beliefs of the reformers in terms of their commitments to the cause of the black slaves, they sought the enactment of a legislation that would puts limits to the oppressive conditions in which the workers had to negotiate their labour force. The strategies may differ in the way that they divert the flow of sentiments raised by the proslavery/antislavery debate a decade earlier towards the treatment of the dividing issue of industrialism, but they all aimed at decreasing the injustices of the new industrial system, that some reforming critics regarded as enslaving to both the masters or factory owners and their labouring poor. Gallagher’s analysis of the analogical discourse on the “white slaves” in the condition-of-England debate is to the point, but she reduces it into an overt polemics between anti-slavery and pro-slavery opponents. We would argue that this analogical discourse has its roots as we have already tried to demonstrate in the theological discourse of the Methodist and Clapham sects.

The second metaphor that dominated the Condition-of-England debate is that of the family-society metaphor. Just as the slave/white worker, the family/society metaphor belongs to the discursive system of late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century England, which like any historically imposed discursive system, governs what can and what cannot be said, and in what manner this can be done. By this we mean that one of the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution is the explosion of the traditional linking ties and their replacement by what Basil Willie calls the “cash nexus”. As can be expected, the separation between the family and society effected by liberal thinkers as John Locke as early as the late seventeenth century no longer held true for the laboring poor with the take-off of the Industrial Revolution. In this liberal thought, the domestic sphere, that is the family, functions according to rules that
fundamentally distinguish it from society at large. In contrast to the rules of cut-throat competition for economic and political power, the family is a site of cooperation involving all the members of the household bound by rules of mutual obligations, between wife and husband, on the one hand, and the parents and the children, and under the supervision of the paternal figure. As long as the Industrial Revolution had not taken place, this liberal vision of the fundamental division did not pose enormous problems for the laboring poor because the economic activity generally happened in the home.

However, with the Industrial Revolution, and the accumulation of capital, economic production moved from the home to the factory or mines. To make their living, the poor were obliged to sell their labour force to the factory owners in exchange of wages, which very often were not sufficient to preserve the children and the women from the hardships imposed by the new system. The male heads, being unable to provide for the family, both the children and the women were sent to the factory to work for very long hours in order earn a small salary likely to compensate for the low wages that the former managed to negotiate when they were still in good health. It is in this ideological context that the factory system and parliamentary reforms and radicals borrowed the family/society metaphor in their attempt to pass a legislation that sought either to protect the family from the encroachment of the industrial society, or to extend the values of the former (cooperation, paternalism) into the latter to make it more human, thus breaking the abusive separation that liberal thinkers established between the two spheres. In this dissertation, I shall argue that the family/society metaphor is a discursive strategy that the factory system and parliamentary reformers, and radicals employed in defence of the laboring poor as a whole. The suffering of children and women in the rhetoric of the reformers is there for its emotional appeal to the higher classes who strongly believed that that these family members needed protection from society. It is understood that a legislation limiting working hours, for example, for the children and women, would eventually be extended to include the male laboring poor. This appropriation of the family discourse to appeal for changes in legislation has been amply analyzed by Gallagher, but her analysis is, just as her of the discourse on “white slave” workers, limited to polemics on the industrial consequences on the family. If Gallagher had sought to dig into the archeology of this discourse, she would have realized that the discourse on family of man which the parliamentary and industrial reformers used as an argument against the excesses of
the industrial revolution has its sources in the Clapham sects’ rhetoric.

**Conclusion:** It follows that Methodist as well as the Clapham Sects aimed to fashion the poor and the labouring poor into a class of obedient servants. To this end, the former fostered in the poor the ideas of hard work, discipline and thrift as requirements for the attainment of divine grace. In their ideological system of beliefs, poverty was elevated into the one principle of life that could guarantee the access of a happy afterlife. This means that the poor Methodist followers could seek to improve their conditions only at the peril of forfeiting the chance of redemption. The Clapham sect addressed the upper classes in nearly the same terms by advising them to accomplish their duties as trustees of God’s wealth by attending to the material needs of the poor while providing the necessary social leadership to lead them on the path of redemption. So, the Clapham sect and the Methodists are heads and tails of the same ideological coin minted and circulated by the capitalist system at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries to maintain the poor in their place and to urge them to give their consent to their exploitation. But as ideological apparatuses, the Methodists and Clapham sects showed contradictions because they aimed to maintain the status quo their strategies of social containment prepared the ground for the emergence of an organized labour force as that of the Chartists and of what is referred to as the “Condition-of-England debate” in English history.
Notes and references:


Internet Sources