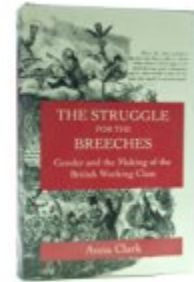


Anna Clark. *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. xv + 416 pp.p. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08624-1.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 1997)



## A. Clark: The Struggle for the Breeches

Published by H-Labor@H-net.msu.edu (September, 1997)

### The Making of the English Working Class Revisited

'The Struggle for the Breeches' is a contribution to a genre that originated with Thompson's 'Making of the English Working Class', a monumental work that inspired several generations of scholars to chronicle the emergence of class and class consciousness in Britain and elsewhere. Clark owes much to Thompson, from the interweaving of culture and institutions to his characterization of ordinary eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britons as plebeians who shared some traditions, values, and institutions but were still in the process of becoming the mid-nineteenth century's working class. Clark is also inspired by feminist scholars (Sally Alexander, Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, and Joan W. Scott), who contend that the work of Thompson and his followers neglect gender in working class formation. Clark aims to "infuse gender - the social construction of manhood and womanhood - into an analysis of class" (p. 2).

Clark offers a fresh look at a pivotal period for Britain's industrial transformation, roughly 1780 to 1825. 'The Struggle for the Breeches' analyzes the emergence of configurations of class and class consciousness by combining a finely-grained analysis of the daily life of two major occupational groups in diverse regions, artisanal trades in London and cotton textile workers in Lancashire and Glasgow, with a macro level analysis of implications of broad social, economic, and cultural

changes. Clark contends that working people's class consciousness emerged partly as a result of radicals' efforts to unify groups divided in various ways. Radicals accomplished this by creating rhetoric that spoke to diverse experiences, including the distress accompanying industrialization. This was difficult not only because industrialization was a complex dynamic process but also because radicals could not simply describe grievances or analyze their source. They drew on popular metaphors that conveyed emotions and provided a vision of a resolution of the most serious problems. Clark examines rhetoric (a term she prefers to language because it is dynamic, implying dialogue) without neglecting institutions, and vice versa. Avoiding the sterile argument about the primacy of culture or material experience, she juggles the complex interconnections of culture and social structure.

The title is a metaphor drawn from popular literature, music, and satire, which represents conflicts in artisans' families due to a sexual crisis that reflected deep changes in the economy and occupational structure. In the late eighteenth century the apprentice system declined and many journeymen could not expect to become masters, a rite of passage that represented a transition to manhood. Stripped of the right to become masters, bachelor journeymen found it difficult to marry and maintain masculine respectability in the old terms. They devised new rituals (involving drinking in pubs and clubs) that reinforced solidarity and manhood, and they measured respectability by skill, despite heavy drinking and frequenting houses of prostitution. Clark contends that the

new notions of manhood were incompatible with men's domestic responsibilities. Since many journeymen did not marry, the illegitimacy rate increased. Those who did marry, or cohabit, relied on wives' economic contribution, but this did not result in an economic partnership. Journeymen tried to keep wives out of the "honorable" sections of their trades because women were a cheap and flexible labor force which threatened skilled crafts. Wives, burdened with household responsibilities as well as wage-earning, which often increased their sense of independence, criticized husbands for squandering money desperately needed for the household and children. Journeymen complained that their wives were attempting to wear the breeches, that is, challenging their authority, and many retaliated with verbal or physical violence, and sometimes desertion and/or bigamy. Underlying this metaphor is one of the study's themes: common experiences and goals often result in bonds between women and men, and among people in the same ethnic group or occupation, but ties that bind are double-edged and may result in divisions between groups as well as unity.

Clark paints a complex picture which suggests that the sexual crisis was less severe among cotton textile workers (including handloom weavers and other skilled cloth handlers) in Lancashire and Glasgow. In textile workers' families, men viewed women as economic partners as well as subordinates. Thus, when the textile industry declined, men did not exclude women from the trade but employed wives and children as helpers or unskilled auxiliary workers. At first this strategy strengthened men's authority and increased prosperity, marriage, and fertility rates. But troubles were to come. The income of weavers' families declined because constantly pregnant women earned less, and high fertility led to a competitive labor market. Clark contends that male textile workers were less likely to resort to violence than journeymen because wives did not threaten their manhood. Male textile workers' masculine respectability was less dependent on fraternal bonding through drinking, and they maintained a tradition of household economic cooperation.

Clark's analysis of this sexual crisis reveals that gender is key to plebeians' response to their distress and radicals' search for political solutions. Clark does not neglect religion, which she views as a moral response and a place for respectable women's voices. Yet her most intriguing analysis concerns radicals' struggle to include working men in the definition of citizenship. Citizenship was based on civic humanism in which political equality applied to male property holders represented in

the public sphere of state politics. Citizenship was intimately related to manhood since men were equal to other men because as property holders they dominated women, children, and servants in households. Plebeians were excluded not only because they did not hold property but also because citizenship was based on the separation of public and private spheres which did not apply to working people. Since separate spheres and domesticity were not part of plebeian ideology, many radicals defined themselves as plebeian citizens in other terms, including masculinity and fraternal bonding.

Clark emphasizes that in order to mobilize plebeians, radicals had to broaden their political base. One solution was to link gender and politics, the personal and political, in ways that appealed to working people and also countered middle class criticisms of plebeian families. Many radicals in the early 1820s (and Chartists in the 1830s) demanded a breadwinner wage which enabled men to support wives and children and adopted domestic ideology and new definitions of masculinity and femininity. In this rhetoric, women were not criticized for challenging male authority, but characterized as needing male protection. Masculine respectability was not based on a fraternity of skilled men, but on morality, self-discipline, and protection of women and children. The rhetoric of domesticity appealed to plebeian men and women and the middle classes because it promised that husbands would not drink up wages, that men could maintain masculine respectability by earning a breadwinner wage, and that working people would adopt middle class morality and restraint.

The thesis of 'The Struggle for the Breeches' is a complicated one and would be clearer if the argument were tighter and less repetitive and if connections between different pieces of the argument were more explicit. Yet the study's strengths far outweigh these flaws. One of Clark's contributions is to suggest that shifts in the nature of hierarchy from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century in Britain changed the configuration of class and class consciousness as well as gender inequality. Clark characterizes social hierarchy in eighteenth century Britain as intricate, with relations of domination and subordination among varied groups. Patriarchal authority relations between women and men were analogous to householders and servants, gentry and commoners, masters and apprentices and journeymen. Women were inferiors, often characterized as "flawed" versions of men. Ordinary people saw little distinction between public and private spaces, and like commoners and servants who often mingled with those in authority,

plebeian women and men often shared the same settings. For women and men, respectability was compatible with sexuality, drinking, and lusty socializing.

Social divisions reflected this hierarchical structure. Plebeians shared some common traditions and attitudes, but like more prosperous people they differed among themselves to the extent that they did not perceive of themselves as a class in contrast to others above or below them. They contrasted themselves to those to whom they were directly subordinate rather than larger social groupings. Just as women did not organize as a self-conscious group in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, neither the working nor the middle classes emerged as a group that was conscious of its position. Clark's study shows that by the mid- to late nineteenth century shifts in perceptions of social structure resulted in changes in gender inequality and other social distinctions. When British workingmen sought political representation, they were demanding political equality with bourgeois men in the public arena. When they changed their rhetoric they also accepted a another world view, the separation of public and private life and ideology of domesticity.

In Britain separate spheres had important implications for configurations of social distinctions. On one level, separate spheres represented new forms of gender inequality and thus new notions of manhood, womanhood, and respectability. Women and men were opposites who inhabited separate, complementary spheres and femininity was equated with morality, dependence, fragility, and domesticity. On another level, the separation of public and private life implied another form of hi-

erarchy among men. The public sphere was a community of men who were equals, as opposed to diverse groups characterized by intricate authority relationships among themselves, (although equality actually applied only to men who held property and had authority over other household members). Thus, as Thompson points out, the term 'working classes' came into use in 1832 when the Reform Acts enfranchised property-holders in part because men of the middle classes began to see themselves as a group defined by political representation in the public sphere. Many working people of varied walks of life who were excluded from suffrage began to view themselves as part of the working classes because they perceived themselves in contrast to a middle class. Clark emphasizes that the working class did not emerge as definitively as Thompson suggests; the definition of working class was still "open-ended" because working peoples' experiences and self-perceptions were varied and changing, and radicals continued to adopt a variety of strategies and rhetorics.

Clark's analysis helps to explain a dimension of social class that Thompson and his followers neglected: the links between gender and other forms of inequality. She demonstrates the relationship between personal conflicts in marriage and struggles for political and economic equality. She also shows that definitions of manhood and womanhood were central to both class and gender. Clark's analysis infuses gender into class because she demonstrates that the separation of spheres not only represented a new form of patriarchal domination and subordination and new gender definitions but also new configurations of class and class consciousness.

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**Citation:** Carole Turbin. Review of Clark, Anna, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

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