

[Fahey on Joyce, 'Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England'](#)

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Patrick Joyce. *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. . \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-44334-0; \$33.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-44802-4.

Reviewed by David M. Fahey (Miami University) **Published on** H-Albion (January, 1995)

Patrick Joyce (University of Manchester) is among the most provocative British historians of our time. His first book made his reputation. In *Work, Society, and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (1980), Joyce showed both his wide reading in primary sources for the industrial North and his sensitivity to historical theory and historiographic debate. His next relevant book did not appear until 1991. This massive volume, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914*, again displayed great learning (notably, in dialect literature) and engagement with theory. Joyce leaped to the forefront of British historians who champion the "linguistic turn."

Those of us who teach and write British history have to reckon with Joyce. Despite the size and difficulty of *Visions of the People*, I assigned it last year to my Victorian England students. This academic year I replaced it with Joyce's latest and much shorter book, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England*, which was published both in hardbound and paperback editions in 1994. Shortly after I had asked my students to read *Democratic Subjects*, H-Net asked me to review it.

A publisher's blurb, printed near the front of the volume and on the back cover of the paperback emphasizes that the book "represents a deepening of Patrick Joyce's engagement with 'post-modernist' theory, seeking the relevance of this theory for the writing of history, and in the process offering a critique of the conservatism of much academic history, particularly in Britain." I should make clear that in neither my teaching nor my research do I earn the name of post-modernist, although I attempt to teach about the new cultural history and regard it sympathetically. I react to *Democratic Subjects* as a generalist aware that history has changed enormously since the early 1980s and willing to try to change too, although often uncertain how to manage the metamorphosis. I entered graduate school before E. P. Thompson published his once-upon-a-time cutting-edge Marxist magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class*. I may be too set in my dowdy eclectic ways to understand every nuance of the post- (and anti-) E. P. Thompson debate today. I encourage others to look for context in the useful polemics by partisans, such as James Vernon, "Who's Afraid of the Linguistic Turn? the Politics of Social History and its Discontents" (*Social History* 19:1, January 1994); and, on the other side, Bryan D. Palmer, "Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism: The Poverty of Theory Revisited" (*International Review of Social History* 38:2, August 1993).

I find it easier to read the dialect poets whom Joyce extensively quotes than the scholarly dialect that

Joyce employs in his more theoretical moments. Consequently, I quote him extensively in an effort to avoid distortion.

Democratic Subjects seeks "to subvert" the distinction "between the representation and the real." It challenges once secure assumptions of social history. To that end Joyce provides two biographical studies of Rochdale men: the obscure working class dialect poet Edwin Waugh ("concerning the 'reality' of poverty") and the renowned Quaker politician John Bright (about the making of "personal and public selves"). It concludes with a third study, an essay on "narrative as collective identity," on the democratic romances that gave lives meaning, in order to explore identity, "the self" and "the social." "The social" is defined as "the sense of collective identities, and the contexts in which these were set."

Joyce once had planned to call his book *The Fall of Class*, "hardly a neutral title," as he favors "a loosening of the hold of class and work-based categories" as part of a de-centering of history. He regards other imagined collectivities--notably that of the people and humanity--as more helpful to historians than class. "The religion of politics, the religion of democracy, with demos as its god," molded the way people of various economic circumstances thought about themselves. "To be part of the democracy, part of the 'people', was decidedly of greater moment than to be part of a 'working class' or a 'middle class'." Studying proto-political perceptions offers more insights than studying productive relations, analyzing subjectivities helps more than analyzing supposed material realities.

Joltingly, Joyce often uses the term "social imaginary." He describes it as "the countless and relatively uncharted forms in which 'society' has been understood," as well as "the ways in which these forms are produced." He pays special attention to a form of the "social imaginary" which he calls the "democratic imaginary." Joyce explains that the pun in his title points at "linked subjectivities, to a subject as a person and as a subject of democracy."

Joyce's highly theoretical introduction sometimes becomes personal as he rehearses the battles of post-modernist scholars with Marxist and liberal historians. For instance, he complains that in denouncing Joyce and Gareth Stedman Jones, Bryan Palmer employs "hateful" epithets "typical of the old New Left at its worst." Beyond personalities, Joyce and his enemies dispute the nature of reality. Joyce argues that "in handling the real," late Victorians such as Waugh and Bright "inevitably construct it" because "meanings are made and not found." In the end Joyce's book is about "the making of meaning."

This review grows long without my having yet done justice to Joyce's difficult and crucial twenty-page introduction. I shall hurry through the much longer sections on Waugh and Bright which do not require an interest in post-modernism to appreciate. In six somewhat repetitious chapters Joyce establishes that the autodidact Waugh developed an ideology of self-respect based on things even more fundamental than the dignity of work: being human, the cult of heart and hearth, the struggle with sin and for a moral life. In his appendices Joyce supports this reading of Waugh with many samples of his dialect verse. Readers probably will most enjoy the five chapters in which Joyce explains how and why John Bright, the plain man's prophet and tribune of the people, was revered before the collapse of Liberalism during the First World War. In his discussion of Bright's early years Joyce strips away the romantic misreading of Quaker egalitarianism and humanitarianism, and throughout the whole book he shows a sureness of touch about Victorian political culture (despite a

slip in which he calls Robert Lowe a reactionary Tory).

The most useful part of *Democratic Subjects* are the seventy-five concluding pages on democratic romances. Joyce begins by arguing that "to make sense of a life is to make it into a story." He sees the creation of narratives as crucial, "the means by which collective identity-as-metaphor circulates." Moreover, narratives such as improvement, providence, and liberty structured social identities. Identity required purpose, and narrative conferred purpose, "a sense of motion and direction." Melodrama was the most popular aesthetic; "its appeal lay in the reassurance that there was a moral purpose and order in the world." Joyce illustrates his observations on narrative and melodrama by citing the tradition among British Marxist historians of Communist populism that offers an anti-capitalist and democratic narrative of English history from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. Joyce smiles at the parallel between the narratives of participants and the narrative of Communist populism: "the 'golden age' account of dispossession and struggle" and then a melodramatic presentation of the nineteenth century. He credits this unconscious parallelism with the strength of the work of E.P. Thompson, his empathy and insight.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the English constitution became "the nearest thing to a political master-narrative." It could have a Tory or a Liberal emphasis. In either event, "it told against class identities, at least in the political sphere." The narrative of the English constitution merged with that of improvement, a conjunction that William Gladstone was concerned to effect in the 1860s and 1870s, together with "the moralisation of politics."

This is a much too selective account of a tantalizingly rich section on narratives in which Joyce raises many questions, for instance, about gender, about sensationalism in the reform press, and the role of leadership in a democracy. As with the book as a whole it deserves careful reading and re-reading.

How do I conclude? I am impressed with many of Joyce's insights, often suggestive for further research. Yet can I jump the fence that once safely separated reality from its representation? Am I willing to follow the linguistic turn (assuming that I understand where it is going)? Probably I shall muddle on, accepting some kind of double-truth, most of the time taking for granting the reality of the real but occasionally asking whether we have created what we like to call reality.

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