

JEREMY SEABROOK AND THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS

Huw Beynon

The subjectivity of the working class forms a central part of all Marxist political economy, and all political groups and parties of the Left claim some access to it; many claim to speak with its voice. Yet the texture of working class experience is something which is rarely questioned. In political and theoretical discourse, working class life is, most often, **sloganised** or interpreted through highly formalistic and simplified frameworks. These frameworks rarely take issue with the daily lives and felt experience and ideas of people. The value of Jeremy Seabrook's books lies in the access they provide to the complexity of working class life; to the importance of language, nuance and metaphor; to the awareness they demonstrate of historical shift in sensibilities and the importance of this for political and social change. Yet his view is also flawed.

In his most recent **book—*Unemployment*¹—Seabrook** is ostensibly concerned to offer direct comparisons of how working people experienced unemployment in two economic recessions—the 1930s and the 1980s. He does this on the basis of visits to Sunderland, **Bolton**, and Birmingham where, by way of several lengthy interviews, the reporting of casual conversation, and observations made on streets, in people's homes and on visits to community and unemployment centres he builds up a powerful and disturbing anthology of sadness and pain. In **Bolton**, he talked with a Mr Travis who started work in the Worsley Mesnes pit when he was thirteen; and he was soon to experience unemployment for the first time:

They just stopped the pit, closed it. There was my father, me and my brother working there. We'd all done a full week, and they announced Friday at one o'clock that the pit was closing. They left everything behind, all the machinery, even the coal we'd been cutting that week. They just cut the ropes left it where it was. . . . It was my first taste of the dole. You had to go to the chapel to sign on then. On Fridays the dole queue stretched right along the **road**, five or six deep, and they'd keep up standing there until nine o'clock at night, and even then you wouldn't get paid. You had to start again on Saturday morning.

Adrian Colquhoun lives in the same town and worked as an electric arc welder. A different job from the pits. Working for a big company that recognised trade unions, that had procedures and shop stewards. But in 1980, he too learned about unemployment and the dole:

A year before we were made redundant, we were all told the jobs were safe. We got an agreement that if there was anybody to go, it'd be through natural wastage; then it became voluntary redundancy; then the last-in-first-out principle. But when it came to it, it really meant getting rid of all those they didn't like. They got rid of the shop stewards first; they do that, then they can do as they like with the rest of the workforce. . . The damage that's being done to skills, the **work**-people who've done their apprenticeships, who've acquired the experience—what a waste. They blame the workpeople for everything. . . they actually blame the workers for all the inefficiencies of capitalism, and people believe it. People don't usually blame themselves, they blame each other. Work has become so divided, it's the car workers', unless you're a car worker, the miners' fault, unless you work in the pits, the steelworkers' fault if you don't happen to be a steel worker, **it's** the blue-collar workers if you're a white collar worker and workers in general if you're not one (p. 184).

And for all of them, increasingly, unemployment and a reliance upon 'the dole' is a threat that hangs over them and their way of life.

In 1936, Rowntree did a survey of unemployment which was aimed at establishing the physical 'minimum requirements' for people out of work. His conclusions were frugal by any standards, and have often been contrasted with the more generous principles which underlie the distribution of benefit under the welfare state. In 1981, however, one economist, David Piachaud, returned to Rowntree's statistics. Fifty years earlier, the weekly requirements for a man, woman and three children was priced at forty shillings and five pence; the modern equivalent (given inflation) would be **£44.55**. Piachaud commented:

The current supplementary benefit provision for an unemployed family of this size is **£66.50** per week. Thus allowing for inflation, the dole now provides. . . only one quarter more than is needed for Rowntree's minimum requirements.²

So, in a real way, Mr Travis and Adrian Colquhoun live in the same world still. And in the Midlands, the North East and North West, **Seabrook** provides ample evidence of this. Through his detailed accounts we hear of women who allow their families the 'luxuries' of streaky bacon and Penguin biscuits and of men who worry more and more as the day arrives to sign on again ('you always get nervous. . .'); of people eating out of dustbins, and of whole families being clothed out of jumble sales; of the havoc that's wrought by the non-arrival of a giro, and the intolerable pressures that unemployment places upon personal relationships, particularly amongst the chronically sick and disadvantaged. Yet if anything, these accounts of material deprivation are understated and subordinated to Seabrook's wider purpose which is to point to a deeper spiritual loss accompanying the changes that have taken place since the war. These changes, he insists, are of 'epic' dimensions and have left the poor bereft of social support, with nothing to buffer them from the

tyranny of the market place and the bureaucratic insensitivity (near brutality) of the 'caring' agencies of the state. His account is one which tells of 'the deep, hidden price that has been paid for the improvements that working class people have seen' (p. 220). As he puts it: 'nothing can express too strongly the sense of injury that has been done to the people' (p. 64).

The account which *Unemployment* offers of the post-war period is of economic expansion in which workers once 'excluded from the benefits of capitalist production', have emerged in, 'a state of captive dependence upon them' (p. 3). Successive generations have found themselves, 'at the mercy of values and definitions shaped by the market place' (p. 35), and with this has come, 'loss and inconstancy, defection and the breaking of bonds between people' (p. 86). At its worst it has involved, 'the amputated capacity to care' (p. 160), as working class life became little more than the 'strident hymning of commodities' (p. 221). Throughout, the warning issued by Richard Hoggart in 1957 is never far from the surface. In *The Uses of Literacy*,³ Hoggart remarked that in the post-war period, changes were taking place that were, 'tending to cause the working class to lose culturally much that has been valuable and to gain less than their new situation should have allowed'. In demonstrating the extent of this loss, Seabrook calls upon the evidence of the nineteenth century:

When E.P. Thompson wrote of the opacity of working class culture, its dense and guarded richness, its well defined complexity and secrecy in the face of capitalist oppression, he might well have been writing about the reverse of what confronts us now. It is the hallucinating display of capitalism that offers an appearance of opaque richness, and the drained working class, transparent as crystal now, gives back increasingly only the reflection of an alien and manufactured diversity. The young see their own reflections in the shop windows, and they haunt the malls and precincts. . . express(ing) the disinheritance of the working class (p. 104).

And we have all connived in this disinheritance. Parents, concerned to give their children a 'good start in life, the best of everything', have 'done something to them which they never anticipated' (p. 144). 'The left' too is culpable. It remained silent, particularly during the sixties, and refused to expand political demands beyond the economic level, thinking that the problem 'could be cured by money, while money is the root cause of it' (p. 101). On top of this there has been a 'collective silence between capital. . . and the representatives of the working class on the price that has been paid' (p. 40). And in Seabrook's mind, in this transaction, 'we have indeed been robbed, and of things beyond price' (p. 92).

This, then, is the 'epic change', a change in which 'the values of the minority. . . have become the norm—the improvident, the self-seeking; while the generosity and the sharing have been eclipsed' (p. 65). And in

Seabrook's view, the consequences are dire indeed for:

this new condition of the working class is not going to lead to socialism. Socialism could have been an organic expression of the way in which people lived and worked together; why it failed to emerge is a subject of almost infinite conjecture and debate. But one thing is sure: we shan't build socialism out of those values now, out of that endurance and frugality, out of that pride and solidarity. The moment has passed (p. 222-3).

This is powerful stuff, it resonates with talk and discussion in the labour movement especially when old and young meet together. In this, the book belies its title, for is not a treatise on unemployment, but a moral judgment on our time and one which **Seabrook** has argued for ten years or more. It is one which needs to be thought through and answered.

In attempting this, it is useful to begin with the theme which Seabrook's writings return to repeatedly: that of a working class culture in 'the past', and of a 'sense of loss' which is felt and articulated in lengthy testimony by people who were born before 1930. These testimonies undoubtedly exist, and there is real substance in Seabrook's belief that the very fact that these statements are given at all (that these old people at this time want to speak) is support in itself for the view that the world of the working class has changed in quite a fundamental way. It is difficult for example, to read through the publications of a group like **Centreprise**,⁴ and escape the feeling that in their accounts of contemporary and pre-war life, we are learning about quite different working classes. In the North East of England too. A more isolated area than the East End of London and perhaps more culturally stable but there the sense of change has also been pronounced. In 1979, for example, **the Strong Words** publishing group produced a collection of accounts of 'changing times on the Durham **coalfield**'.⁵ The booklet was discussed in a meeting at the Town Hall in Crook, a small town in the South West of the country. Before the war several pits had operated in the locality, feeding the local coke works, and coal was a dominant industry in the town through the nineteen sixties. Today the pits remain in memory only, and in pubs old men will crawl under tables and chairs explaining to 'strangers' how they had to work to dig the coal out of the Ballerat seam: 'the best coking coal in the world'. At the meeting, a dialogue developed and during it one young man said this: 'We can see from the way the older ones talk about your lives, that you have something to feel proud of. But what have us younger ones got to be proud of? We've nothing like that.'

All this is grist to Seabrook's mill, and so it's time to introduce a cautionary note, beginning with some of the problems caused by his method of analysis. In talking of 'the past' we are faced with questions of time and place, and here Seabrook's account is highly generalised and unspecific. He writes, for example, of a working class culture that has

existed for 'a couple of centuries or so' and seems unwilling to contemplate other changes over this period when people have expressed equally intense feelings of loss. Furthermore, he presents his account as having universal significance. He pays no attention to important regional variations in class experience within Britain (in fact, almost all of Seabrook's work relates to England), and more significantly, sees the experience of dispossessed Jamaican peasants 'precisely parallel' to that of the British working class since the war. The story he constructs is of unremitting tragedy. It is an account of near-total cultural decay and as it unfolds (with the religious metaphor always near at hand) it takes on powerful metaphysical qualities. These qualities are given free rein by the nature of the material through which the argument is developed.

Seabrook's work relies entirely upon subjective accounts, and in *Unemployment* he builds his argument around a mixture of carefully worded, tape-recorded testimony and noted observation of spontaneous comment and interaction. Each equally valid, but very different from each other. For example, old men in their homes with their families around them tend not to swear; young men with their mates do so incorrigibly and obscenely. The contrast, in print, is a graphic one, yet only rarely does **Seabrook** warn the reader of the problem of interpretation. Mostly the accounts are left to stand side by side, heightening (in a way which is not legitimate) the sense of change, and leaving the impression that much of the material is included for its shock qualities. All this raises questions about the purpose of the account.

Jeremy **Seabrook** is, above all else, a child of Richard Hoggart. It is to Hoggart he turns, repeatedly, for his models of class culture and for his politics. It was Hoggart, remember, who argued in 1957 that the reforming minority of political activists had an obligation to the past; an obligation to preserve a culture that was being sold behind the backs of those who were less aware. It is toward this 'active minority' that **Seabrook** directs his writing. In an earlier book he wrote of Labour Party activists who were 'increasingly isolated from the working class they aim to serve'.⁶ These people he feels are 'living in the past', and in *Unemployment*, he criticises their 'defiant optimism', and their insistence upon 'keeping faith' with a vision of social change and the working class which had a place in the nineteenth century but is no more. His accounts of working class life are meant to bring such people down to earth. And here the familiar comparison with **Orwell** takes an intriguing twist. In the 1930s, **Orwell** too was concerned to shock the middle class; his aim was to show them how wretched were the lives endured by workers whose energies were at the very foundation of society. Seabrook, in contrast, details how wretched are the workers themselves, and how their lives have come to perpetuate the capitalist order. With such a purpose, it's not surprising that the overwhelming impression created by the book is of hopelessness.

Occasionally, in *Unemployment*, the reader is directed beyond the immediate subjective experience and towards the overarching pattern of change. And here the central preoccupation is with 'consumerism' and of a humanity overwhelmed and debased in the shop window. **Seabrook** quotes an old woman from Sheffield saying: 'working class people used to be proud of how much they could do with very little money; now people feel ashamed of how little they can do without a lot of it' (p. 3), and it is impossible to deny the poignancy of these words. So too with many other of the allusions made to the dominance of consumerism and the market place in the pages of *Unemployment*. The effect of advertising, of branding and the hard sell upon the structure of wants—particularly amongst the young—is disturbing; doubly so, given the way in which this abundance exists in a world where the threat of sickness, famine and violent death predominates. But to say this is not to solve the problem. 'Consumerism' (its nature and effects) needs to be outlined and interpreted, and in this **Seabrook** demonstrates a view of 'culture' and change which is highly mechanical. The new 'consumer culture' is seen as a direct product of the market place, obliterating, near totally, all traces of earlier cultural forms. As he puts it: 'The working class has been gutted of most of its substance and a dependence upon commodities has been substituted for it' (p. 8). In an earlier, more affluent time, he had written:

There is no longer any need to fear the loyalty and commitment of the working class to capitalism because of the spread of consumerism: the middle class moved out great encircling pseudopodia and clutched a substantial part of the working class in its embrace.'

Here too Hoggart has a deep influence. As he once wrote of a working class trapped in 'the hypnosis of immature emotional satisfaction' so does **Seabrook** refer to the market becoming a 'substitute for everything. . . morality, beliefs, philosophy of life, and, above all, a consolation, a soft self-indulgent solace for having no other reason for *living*'.⁹ Viewed in this way (through the severe, near absolute, standards of this English tradition) the mass market and its products (automatic cameras, video, electronic games, calculators. . .) are totally dismissed as 'ugly implants' in people's lives. No attempt is made to consider the possibility of such products facilitating forms of imaginative and cultural development. The fact that story-telling revolves around robots, machines and space exploration (around manufactured and not **spiritual/mystical** themes) is seen as sufficient evidence to dismiss them as worthless. Nowhere is an attempt made to work with ideas of cultural renewal or with the importance of new inventive forms within the class. While he draws upon Raymond Williams' notion of 'the structure of feeling', the usage is cursory and the influence of Williams ends with this citation." We are left with a view

of the working class which gives no place to popular culture as an imminent, dynamic form and this elitist adjudication of cultural practice weighs heavily upon the account.

While **Seabrook** recognises that many of the 'consumerist' wants are real needs (a part of the new structure of life where council estates have high cost central heating and where public transport—or its **absence**—made a car a prerequisite for getting to work) he underestimates people's abilities to share his understanding. He underestimates too the extent to which, in these changed and often hostile circumstances, patterns of caring, acts of charity and kindness still survive. For example, while local collections are taking place all over Britain to subsidise particular or general inadequacies in the National Health Service (providing bionic hands and body scanners. . .) **Seabrook** expresses surprise that beggars receive money in the poor streets of Birmingham. In all, his antipathy to 'consumerism' produces a view of the working class which is lacking in compassion and borders on contempt. Ten years ago (and with some prophetic quality) he said this:

If this present generation of consumers become an economic archaism like their grandparents, it is impossible not to wonder if they too will be stranded in old age, croaking like ancient children over the tawdry toys which they have been trained carefully to **enjoy**.¹¹

In *Unemployment* his question is answered:

The sense of shabbiness in the house of today's **poor** is different from that shabbiness of the houses of the old poor. . . The Rexine splits and the bright ornaments of only two or three years ago look worn—the opalescent punch set with its coral plastic cups hanging round the bowl, are dyed red grasses, the **glass** fish, the storm lamp with its panels of frosted plastic. The gauzy runner across the sideboard becomes inextricably dingy; the picture of the Creation of Adam and Eve looking like **Tarzan** and Jane, she up to her navel in water, seems to lose its **colour**; the electronic games from Texas don't work; the instrument assembled in Taiwan has fallen to pieces. . . Everything in these poor homes now is provisional and impermanent; not homes at all many of them, but places of brief sojourn in which everybody seems to be on a list waiting for transfer. Places it seems into which violence and cruelty can easily gain admittance; where parents, helpless and impotent can easily strike the screaming child; where the fragility of relationships between adults seems to mirror the lack of durability of all the used-up objects in the house; and people wear out their love for each other as readily as they do last year's fashions. And the story they tell about who moved in with some woman in the next block, whose husband pissed off with some tart he picked up down the club, who left her old man because he was having it off with some bint where he worked. . . (p. 160–1).

The language of these accounts is important. So too is the way that 'consumerism' is seen to be totally corrosive of personal attachments and

quite ubiquitous in its influence. While **Seabrook** writes of the need to clarify the 'overlapping but separate processes' involved in the changes that have taken place, he rarely does, and this weakness becomes clear if we reflect for a moment upon many of his examples. Take the case of a young woman who, **shy**, afraid and unprepared for her interview at the DHSS is accompanied by her mother, who speaks for her. **Seabrook** explains:

What she wanted to say but couldn't, was that she wasn't able to speak for herself, and that it wasn't her fault. Like many others of her generation Karen had no experience of anything very much apart from the commercially created culture in which she has been nurtured with its invitations to fantasy, inertia and **unknowingness** (p. 73).

But what of the experience of schooling? What of the particular vulnerabilities of a young woman before male authority? Why not discuss these too? Similar questions are prompted by this account of the position of black youngsters:

The parents have adapted to this new culture where everything depends upon money and the young find they have been shaped by that culture and are then denied the chance to **survive** in it because they are the new **poor, stigmatised** by their lack of skills. When this coincides with black skins it looks an even greater discrimination (p. 71).

The fact that 'blackness' appears so late in this account (and then as a matter of coincidence) is significant. It contrasts markedly with what black people themselves have been saying publicly, and in the pages of this book; 'no black is going to get anywhere because they're black'; 'The police are there because it's what white people want. . .' It is racism and not consumerism that brings the most pain here. And while its growth can be related to the rise of unemployment, as an ideology it has a life of its own, separate from the market and within the working class.

More central to **Seabrook's** argument is the contrast he draws between the present generation of workers, and an earlier working class involved in 'necessary', 'productive' work. He writes of a time when work had a heroic quality, 'an epic. . . with its demands for the last ounce of human energy and more'. Then, people produced things that were 'directly identifiable with perceived human need as opposed to that of making money' (p. 4), and socialist politics emerged as a 'natural evolution' from this situation. Today, work has changed. **Seabrook** talks of the 'old structures of work' 'decaying', and of workers being caught up in a 'spiral that distances work from everything that is demonstrably useful or valuable to humanity, and makes the alternative to profit even more

remote and unthinkable' (p. 214).

There are many problems with this account. To begin with, it is a feature of capitalism that goods are produced as commodities and sold for money. Under this arrangement it has been the logic of capital which has decided what production is necessary and what is not, and which has determined the subordination of the working class as 'necessary' too. The distinction which **Seabrook** makes between a time when this subordination was for 'the sake of necessary work' and the situation today when 'subordination (is) for the sake of nothing other than its continued subordination' (p. 11) is not a sound one.¹² His heroic interpretation of work in the earlier period is also unsound. Raphael Samuel has outlined the mindless tedium which was the lot of most manual workers in the nineteenth century, and this, as well as Gareth Stedman-Jones' account of *Outcast London* (where casual labourers lived off the fringes of the aristocratic season), sit uneasily with Seabrook's presentation of the past.¹³ If life in this period was 'meaningful' it was made so by the people who lived it. It didn't arrive automatically from 'necessity', nor did politics. Farmers and agricultural workers (to take one of Seabrook's examples of necessary labour) have had a chequered history on the political stage in Europe. Miners too, for while it can be argued that the extractive nature of work in that industry was conducive to radical understandings of exploitation (often, it should be said, via historically derived biblical references to God's earth and the life) this radicalism was expressed through liberalism until comparatively late. Yet in Labour strongholds like Tyneside, skilled men, for generations, worked upon implements of war and destruction. The relationship between economics, work and politics is a much more complex affair than **Seabrook** allows for, and the historical weakness is mirrored in his contemporary account.

Work and work processes *have* altered in the twentieth century, but there has been much more involved here than decay; more too than a change in the nature of commodities. Mass production is an underpinning theme for much of Seabrook's argument, yet it is rarely analysed. In *Unemployment*, he relies heavily upon quotations from Illich and Schumacher to create an image of the new work processes and their subjective significance. In this way he talks of a 'stripping away of meaning' and of the emergence of 'quite different human beings from the old proletarian type', but it is the market illusion (people 'wrenched from any context of human obligation or commitment')¹⁴ which again dominates. And this is not good enough. As one French commentator has pointed out:

It is not possible to confine the operative models of a popular culture to the past, the countryside, or to primitive peoples. They exist in the strongholds of the contemporary economy. This is the case with 'ripping off. This phenomenon spreads everywhere, even if management penalises it or 'looks the other way' in

order to know nothing of it. . . . workers who 'rip off subcontract time from the factory (rather than goods, for only scraps are used) with a view of work that is free, creative and precisely without profit.¹⁵

Considerable evidence exists which illustrates the fact that workers, in even the most 'meaningless' of work situations, find ways of handling monotony and tedium which are often creative and mutually supportive.¹⁶ The worry about Seabrook's account is that it isn't open enough to even consider such evidence. His preoccupation with the market and with moral (absolute) assertions of necessity, blinker his view of working class life, and the changes that have taken place since the war, and this is most clear in his treatment of women and the relationship between the sexes.

In drawing attention to the 'old' working class, Seabrook explicitly mentions four industries: coal, steel, construction and fishing. What these industries have in common is that they have remained for a century or more the exclusive preserve of male manual labour. The 'old' working class in this account is therefore one where the women worked at home. As such the transformation in the culture of the class is linked with the rise of occupations employing female labour. This change is a central issue for any discussion of cultural change (especially one concerned with the 'structure of feeling') and its importance invades the pages of testimony. Seabrook's treatment of the issue is however, cursory in the extreme. Talking with an old man in Sunderland, we learn that: 'in this part of the world the only jobs for women are actresses and prostitutes, and there wasn't much call for either of them' (p. 132). As he speaks, his wife sits and listens. Seabrook comments:

She nods assent to his account of their life. If she agrees with him it isn't because she is subordinate to him and echoes his ideas, it is because the conditions under which they have lived excluded any other than a shared response of stoicism and endurance (p. 135).

Maybe; maybe not. Certainly it is unlikely that this woman was an actress or a prostitute. More likely than not, she worked as a domestic servant before she married. Then, and particularly in the North East, the woman's place was securely entrenched in domestic labour, and when speaking of those times women there (and in South Wales too) often talk of themselves (or their mothers) as being a 'slave of a slave'. Listen to another account of the family household between the wars:

There's no doubt about it, the men of that generation were the kingpins of the house. Other people cleaned their shoes. They had a special seat: nobody dared sit in their seat. This kind of thing. My wife's father; nobody dared pass him in case their shadow went on his newspaper. This was a general kind of thing at the time. They were tyrants really in their own way.¹⁷

Few women today would want to 'put the clock back' to that situation. Few regret the (albeit limited) expansion of employment opportunities for their sex. While some (maybe many) of the older generation might think that young people jump into and out of marriage too easily, few would wish to return to a time when divorce was near impossible, contraception difficult to ensure and abortion a positive danger to life. To say this is not to gloss over problems. One of the women interviewed for the book had been divorced:

At first just to get out of it, the relief is overwhelming. The sense of freedom. But that doesn't last long; the boredom soon sets in, the sense of futility. It's a different kind of loneliness from what you feel inside a lonely marriage. You achieve what you want, but when you achieve it, it seems so little. You only think of what you're escaping from, not what you're **running** to (p. 84).

There is a deep and fundamental dilemma here, probably a tragic one.¹⁸ It's a dilemma which touches upon major existential issues (problems of freedom and responsibility) upon which **Seabrook** is well qualified to comment. He has, after all, written of the policing role of the family within the 'old' culture:

It was a self-policing community, in which the individuals were constricted at the level of the most basic physiology; you were born, you were married, you worked, you had children **and** you died. Nobody dared affirm anything **else**.¹⁹

You want to ask: 'are these the historical options—constriction or excess; self-denial or loneliness?' But here there is no comment. These women's words are left to lie on the page. And this is but one instance.

In *Unemployment*, when **Seabrook** talks of 'the working class young', he is invariably talking about boys. Perhaps there are all manner of more or less acceptable excuses for this (discussions with girls might have been difficult to arrange etc.), but what is not excusable is the casual and passing reference to women's liberation posters in Community Centres, and the unchecked references to women evoked from the time he spends with the young men. In Sunderland he recounts the dirty stories told by a group of these lads when they were together. He also quotes one lad saying, in private that:

I can't trust women. I think they're getting at me all the time. The only good women are prossies; it's honest, you pay and that's that (p. 131).

In Lancashire too the stories are of 'getting girls' and there we read of details of a hard pornographic photograph used by one young man during masturbation. In **Bolton**, **Seabrook** pays his E2

admission to a home video pornographic show: 'the colour of the film is appalling, and the flesh looks bruised, unnatural violets and reds seem to predominate' (p. 206).

All these accounts are real and believable. Many people will find it disturbing to read them. What is most disturbing however, is the author's *silence*. **Seabrook** is a man of great literary skill—he has a great talent for dealing with and writing about, the ways in which people think and feel. He constructs a book out of his notes and tape recordings. These accounts were not included by accident. They form a central part of the book's structure. But it is an unspoken part; being barely challenged or interpreted within the book's wider framework.

In the documentary drama *Underage*, film makers **Lizzie** Lemon and **Kim** Longinott produce an account of unemployment, based upon three months they spent with fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds in Coventry. The lads are seen fighting, bullying, drinking, swearing and sniffing glue, and, here as David Robins pointed out in *The Times*, 'it is the women who provide the stabilising element'. They also provide a critical perspective on their boy friends.

He just never shows his feelings and I think that's wrong. . . That time when he pushed his mum—he wanted to say he was sorry but he couldn't 'cos then he'd say 'I've been defeated'. He's stupid.²⁰

Comments like this are missing in Seabrook's book. It's a sad absence, and one which must be seen as an abiding weakness of the account.

The pages of *Unemployment*, have a haunting quality about them. The accounts go round and around in your head. More than anything else, they perplex you: why, you ask, did a working class with an established way of life of such apparent solidity, cave in so quickly and so easily? We have already noted the way in which mining areas were ravaged in the 1960s. The pits were closed and whole villages and communities transformed. In Durham a Labour council operated the now notorious 'D Village' policy, where villages so categorised were systematically starved of social and industrial capital, forcing people to leave for the 'pools of labour' on the centre of the county. It was the same in the East End of London: one account of how a working class community in **Clapton** was subject to 'redevelopment' and 'compulsory purchase' is remarkable both for the attachment it reveals people feeling for life in the area, and the absence of any reference to organised action against the *move*.²¹ What accounts like these raise is the question of *politics* and its relation to *culture*; and here there is no denying the central theme of Seabrook's writing, that the socialist movement is in a state of crisis and that 'the work achieved by the Labour movement has to be done all over again' (p. 11).

In writing about this crisis, Gareth Stedman-Jones has noted the need to 'step back from the present apologies offered by Right and Left of the (Labour) Party and take a longer term historical **perspective**'.²² Seabrook aids this perspective by his insistence (via Thompson) of the need to investigate the sub-political world of the working class and its subterranean mood. But such an analysis needs to conjoin, at some point, with politics on the surface, and here Seabrook, careful to avoid simplified notions of 'betrayal', observes that, 'none of what has occurred was done in malice or bad faith'. Rather the problem lay in the fact that:

While capital didn't rest, labour fell into a kind of stasis, a sort of immobilisation, above all, an absence of imagination. The leaders of labour believed that the gains had been won for all time. They thought the achievements of 1945 inviolable, sacrosanct. They were attached to an optimistic progressivism which in the end became a substitute for moral force; and together these things had a crippling influence on an understanding of just what has happened at a deeper level until it was too late. But it wasn't a defection of love or commitment; at worst a kind of exhaustion, lack of imagination, a certain gullibility.²³

But surely this 'progressivism', this 'lack of imagination' and 'gullibility' needs to be analysed and located in political practice. And here Seabrook's tragic vision could have been leavened with a sense of irony. Many of the areas where the old 'poverty culture' thrived, have been associated with the dominance of Labour Party machines whose crimes in the 1960s were more venal than 'silence' or a 'defection of love'. The corruption scandals in the North East and South Wales (each of which, and successively, reaffirmed a mood of depression amongst working class people, a sense that 'nothing can be done') cannot be seen as yet another example of the corrosive power of consumerism. Labour practices, themselves responded to and influenced the movement of money. For in these areas, where the Aldermanic benches weighed heavily with local Labour dignitaries, Labourism was expressed through the patriarchal and often autocratic, structures of the community. To say this is not to shout 'sell out', or to mock from the privilege of hindsight. Rather it is to assert the presence of deeply conservative and restrictive elements within that **political/cultural** formation that we term 'Labourism'. It is also to raise, precise and particular questions which Seabrook's highly generalised analysis does not facilitate.

In the 1960s, it was in areas where Labourism had had the least powerful hold (for example, Merseyside and the West Midlands) that resistance took place most openly. Workers in these areas were not, as Seabrook suggests, operating in a 'social vacuum' but were interpreting and developing working class experience and traditions in new contexts. In Liverpool in 1967 one man who worked at the Ford plant at Halewood said this:

My old **fella** was a trade unionist. Branch secretary, shop steward and all tha'. He always used to be on about the bosses. . . the capitalists, the General Strike an' tha'. I didn't pay much attention to him. Him and the union caused a lot of trouble in our house. I wanted to be out on the street dancing or having a few bewies. The old lady used to side with me. But when I came to this place. . . Jesus. . . what a place. It's funny I've remembered all the things my da' said. About the movement an' tha'. I've become as big a unionist as him now. Sometimes I wish I'd listened to him a bit more. He's dead now like and I'd liked to have talked to him. . . I'd like to tell him that I know **now**.

Accounts like this one can be multiplied many times over and meshed in with struggles and conflicts many of which involved the fight to **democratis**e what were essentially despotic trade union structures. Yet **Seabrook's** account of those years is of:

The working class struggle—a phrase which still had meaning in our childhood in the forties—suddenly **becom[ing]** nothing but an institutionised **ritual**.

As with Williams so does **Seabrook** break with Edward Thompson and that humane tradition within Marxism which stresses the creative aspects of human understanding and struggle. In 1978, Thompson wrote:

In my view, far too much theoretical attention (much of it plainly a-historical) is paid to 'class' and far too little to 'class struggle'. Indeed class struggle is the prior as well as the most universal **concept**.

In contrast, **Seabrook** ignores (or undervalues) the struggles fought through by working class people in the sixties and seventies—and in the eighties too—and his writings consistently neglect them. Given his concern for the changed patterns of caring within the working class, it might have been useful to have walked with the People's March for Jobs. Also, perhaps, to have talked with trade unionists, active in the **TGWU's** 6-612 Branch for unemployed workers on Merseyside. The occupation organised by the women workers at Plessey's **Bathgate** plant would be another example of workers facing the issues of unemployment together and in struggle. Instead, he restricts his comments to the riots. Here, where the 'ritual' bursts its seams, he notes:

the images they produced of looting and destruction do not suggest a resistance to capitalist values, much less the expression of a desire for an alternative. Such reactions are a measure of the growing political impotence of the working class.

To point to the continuance of collective forms of struggle is not to respond with another form of metaphysics, nor is it to underestimate the gravity of the situation for the socialist movement in Britain. Rather it is

to make clear that a variety of historical factors (far more various than 'consumerism') have contributed to the present crisis, and that the game is not yet over. Seabrook's comments on the ways in which the politics of Thatcher and the extreme Right ('the only groups that touch the pain') have engaged with the felt experiences of working class people is vitally important; and everything he says about the need for the Left to listen is salutary. But the listening has to be interpreted, and it has to relate to a conception of politics and change which is practical and realisable. It is here that Seabrook's resistance to the potential of new forms of class practice is most destructive. Clear that we cannot go back, he steadfastly (stoically) refuses to imagine a way forward. Refuses too, to take issue with the nature of economic crisis of the 1980s and the ways in which it differs from the one faced by workers in the 1930s. When Adrian Colquhoun spoke of groups of workers separated off from each other (p. 286 above) he was talking about something that is rooted in real processes. So too when workers talk of the speed of rundown and closure. Yet Seabrook, firm in his view that the road to socialism is not by expropriating the rich and powerful but 'simply by rendering obsolete the absurd ideological apparatus by which they are maintained' (p. 65) takes no account of the ways in which capital has reconstructed itself via transnational production and the like. Nor of the ways in which the *economic* crisis of British capital (the crisis which has pushed up the rate of unemployment) has conjoined with a political crisis, which has deep implications for the Labour Party. The experience of that party in government (its failure to establish a socialist programme coupled with the direct evidence of many of those reforms which have been implemented—most notably nationalisation), has had its own, independent, effect upon the political culture of the working class. As one shop steward said after the closure of the B.L. plant in Liverpool in 1978:

I know what Edwardes is. He's a bleeding capitalist. I don't mind him carrying out capitalist kind of decisions. What I object to is people who are supposed to be on our side, being a party to these decisions. Harold Wilson is a local M.P. and he played no part whatsoever in our attempt to save the plant.²⁷

As 'decay' is an inappropriate metaphor to illuminate the changes that have taken place in work processes, so too is 'rest' (or the refusal of it) less than helpful in explaining the dynamic of capitalist development since the war. Capital, like rust, never sleeps, but unlike that corrosive agent, it is capable of changing its form. There are limits to this of course, and the task of the socialist movement is to take issue with the changes; understand them and fight **back**. And in this there are plenty of resources. Seabrook emphasises hopelessness, but deep feelings of resentment and anger exist within the working class which occasionally break

through into the pages of *Unemployment*. One man said this:

They talk about extremism. What about their extremism? Treating people like rubbish, isn't that extremism? (p. 205)

Here, and in the countless other statements like them being made daily, there is hope for a socialist movement. But for that hope to be realised, socialists need to adjust themselves to a capitalist society remarkably different from the one in which the labour movement constructed itself at the turn of the century. There are some signs still that a new movement is possible; 'in the making' even. It has to be fought for, not abdicated.

NOTES

1. *Unemployment*, Quartet Books, 1982. Each quotation followed by a page number is taken from this book.
2. D. Piachaud, *The Times*, 25th June 1982.
3. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Chatto and Windus, 1957, p. 17.
4. Most especially, *Working Lives: A People's History of Hackney*, Vols. 1 and 2.
5. The booklet was called *But the World Goes on the Same*, Strong Words, 1979.
6. *What Went Wrong: Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement*, Gollancz, 1978, p. 244.
7. Jeremy Seabrook, *The Everlasting Feast*, Allen Lane, 1974, p. 117.
8. *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 323.
9. *The Everlasting Feast*.
10. See, for example, R. Williams, *Materialism and Culture*, New Left Books, 1982. Also the publications of the Centre of Contemporary Culture Studies in the University of Birmingham, especially *Working Class Culture*, Hutchinson, 1979 and *Resistance Through Ritual*, Hutchinson, 1978.
11. *The Everlasting Feast*, p. 17.
12. See, for example, R. Marglin, 'What Do Bosses Do?' in A. Groz (ed.), *The Division of Labour in Society*, Harvester Press, 1975.
13. R. Samuel, 'The Workshop of the World', in *History Workshop Journal* No. 7, 1978, G. Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London*, Oxford University Press, 1971.
14. *What Went Wrong*, p. 76.
15. Michel de Certeau, 'The Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life', in *Social Text*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1980.
16. The latest comes from an account by another Frenchman, R. Linhart, *The Assembly Line*, John Calder, 1981.
17. T. Monaghan, in K. Armstrong and H. Beynon (eds.), *Hello Are You Working?* Strong Words, 1977.
18. Another way of understanding this dilemma, (and the problem of various interpretations within the socialist movement) can be obtained by reading Seabrook's account of the post-war period, alongside the one offered by Anna Coote and Bea Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, Picador, 1982.
19. *The Everlasting Feast*, p. 160.
20. *The Times*, August 6th, 1982.
21. *The Island: The Life and Death of an East London Community 1870-1970*, Centreprise, 1979.
22. G. Stedman-Jones, 'March into History', *New Socialist*, January/February, 1982.

23. *The Guardian*, 1st March 1982.
24. Huw Beynon, *Working For Ford*, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 190.
25. *The Everlasting Feast*, p. 117.
26. E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', *Social History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, May 1978, p. 149.
27. Quoted in *What Happened at Speke?* TGWU, Liverpool 1978. See also the account of the Callaghan government's industrial policy in *State Intervention in Industry: A Workers' Inquiry*, Coventry, Liverpool, Newcastle and N. Shields Trades Council, 1980.