I. THE LONDON 'MOB' OF THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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IN their use of the term 'mob', historians of the eighteenth century have
generally neglected to define and to analyse it and have often shown a tendency
to confuse the uses to which it might reasonably be applied. These may
perhaps be summarized as follows:

First, its use as an omnibus term for the 'lower orders', common people,
'inferior set of people' (Wilkes's phrase), 'fourth estate', or what the French
later called 'sans-culottes'—in brief, the lower strata of society in the pre-
industrial age. Henry Fielding, in 1752, writes of 'that very large and
powerful body which form the fourth estate in this community and have
long been dignified by the name of the Mob'.[1] A more uncommon use of the
term is from 1736—a year of considerable popular disturbance—when one
of Sir Robert Walpole's informers speaks of the discontents and murmurings
prevalent 'through all this Mobbish part of the Town'.[2] The people
so described are, of course, sharply distinguishable from 'the people' in the
sense used by William Beckford in Parliament in November 1761: 'I don't
mean the mob; neither the top nor the bottom, the scum is perhaps as mean
as the dregs. I mean the middling people of England, the manufacturer, the
yeoman, the merchant, the country gentleman, they who bear all the heat
of the day.'[3]

Secondly, the use of 'mob' when referring to a hired gang acting in the
interest of a particular political group or faction. In this sense, we might
apply it to the gang, or 'mob', of Irish chairmen hired by the Court candidate,
Sir William Beauchamp Proctor, to protect him and beat up his rival's sup-
porters in the Middlesex election of December 1768.[4]

Thirdly—and perhaps most commonly—we find the term 'mob' used by
contemporaries, and repeated by historians, to apply indiscriminately to
crowds engaged in riots, strikes or political demonstrations. The most common
confusion arises perhaps between these two last uses, as crowds so engaged are
frequently assumed, without further investigation, to be the passive instru-

[1] Cit. J. P. de Castro, *The Gordon Riots* (Oxford, 1926), 249.
[2] Cambridge University Library, Cholmondeley (Houghton) MSS., Group P/70, file 2/14.
[3] See Lucy S. Sutherland, 'The City in Eighteenth-Century Politics', in *Essays presented
to Sir Lewis Namier* (1957), 66.
[4] G. Rudé, '"Wilkes and Liberty", 1768–69', [The] Guild[hall] Misc[ellany], no. 8,
July 1957, 13.

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ments of outside parties and to have no particular motives of their own other than loot, lucre, free drinks or the satisfaction of some lurking criminal instinct.

It is in this third sense of 'crowd' rather than of a stratum of society or hired strong-arm gang that the term is generally used in this paper. The main sources on which I have drawn are the Old Bailey printed *Proceedings*, the Sessions papers in the London, Middlesex and Surrey Record Offices; and the Rate Books and Land Tax assessments of the metropolitan parishes.[5] In addition to these, there are, for the year 1736, two files among the private papers of Sir Robert Walpole deposited with the Cambridge University Library, which are both of considerable general interest and of particular importance to my subject.[6] With the aid of these materials a study has been made of three episodes in the history of eighteenth-century London which, between them, form the substance of the present paper: the London riots of 1736; the 'Wilkes and Liberty' movement of 1768–9; and the Gordon Riots of 1780.[7] While these episodes can, of course, not claim to be fully representative of all the varied London movements and popular disturbances of the century, they may help to indicate certain lines of approach to the subject as a whole, point to some general conclusions and suggest further steps in research. With the aid of these samples, then, it is here proposed to discuss how London 'mobs' behaved, how they were composed, what motives or ideas impelled or prompted them, and what further light such movements help to throw on the origins of a mass Radical movement in Britain.

The typical form of activity to which eighteenth-century urban demonstrators and rioters resorted were not the strikes, petitions and public mass meetings with which we have grown familiar. There are, indeed, important exceptions: strikes were already frequent and sometimes took forms that were not substantially different from those we know today;[8] and the great rallies of Wilkes's supporters in May 1768 and of Lord George Gordon's Protestant petitioners in June 1780, both in St George's Fields, were, in many respects, similar to more recent gatherings in Trafalgar Square or Hyde Park in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet more typical of the times were the parades of itinerant bands, marching (or running) through Shoreditch, the City of London, Westminster or Southwark, gathering fresh forces on the

[5] For fuller details of sources, see the articles listed in n. 7 below.

[6] Cholmondeley (Houghton) MSS., Group P/70. I am indebted to the Most Hon. the Marquess of Cholmondeley, G.C.V.O., for his kind permission to use these papers.

[7] For a fuller treatment of these episodes, see G. Rudé, '"Mother Gin" and the London Riots of 1736' [to appear shortly in *The Guildhall Miscellany* (hereafter cited as 'London Riots, 1736', with page-references relating to the typescript)]; '"Wilkes and Liberty", 1768–69', *Guild. Misc.*, no. 8, July 1957 (cited as *Guild. Misc.* (1957)); 'The Gordon Riots: a Study of the Rioters and their Victims', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, vol. 6, 1956 (cited as *Transactions* (1956)); and 'Some Financial and Military Aspects of the Gordon Riots', *Guild. Misc.*, no. 6, Feb. 1956 (cited as *Guild. Misc.* (1956)).

[8] For the numerous London trade disputes of 1768–9, see *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 15–20.

way, that were a feature of all three of these episodes. Frequently they were 'captained' by men whose personality, speech, dress or momentary assumption of authority marked them out as leaders: such 'captains', sometimes described by eyewitnesses as 'carrying a drawn sword' or 'riding on a horse', were Tom the Barber, who led a contingent of demonstrators in Goodman's Fields during the riots of July 1736; William Pateman, a journeyman wheelwright, who directed the attack made on Robert Charlton's house in Coleman Street during the Gordon Riots; and Thomas Taplin, a coach-master, who 'captained' the rioters collecting money 'for the poor Mob' in Great Russell Street on the same occasion.[9] They may, too, have passed on to their followers the slogans of the day, whose chanting in unison both terrified 'respectable' onlookers and served so effectively to rally supporters—such slogans as 'Down with the Irish!' (1736), 'Wilkes and Liberty!' (1768), and 'No Popery!' (1780). It is also frequently alleged by eyewitnesses that these 'captains' carried 'lists' of houses that had to 'come down', or whose windows were due to be smashed—as they often were, anyway, if their owners did not respond promptly enough to the summons to put out candles or 'light up', when bidden to do so by the crowds.[10] But, whether such 'lists' ever existed in fact or were entirely apocryphal, the purposes that they were supposed to serve were genuine enough: in all three disturbances a common feature was the picking out of the houses of selected victims, whose property might be partly destroyed—or 'pulled down'—in the traditional manner;[11] or who, if the occasion appeared to demand less drastic reprisals, might escape with a few broken panes.

In either event, the damage was often considerable and led to substantial claims for compensation by the rioters' victims. Among the more modest of such claims was that put in by John Walden, publican of *The Bull and Butcher* in Cable Street, whose eighteen lodgers were all in bed when the rioters of July 1736 advanced on his house, shouting, 'Down with the Irish!' He later reported the loss of a joint of meat and the smashing of six shutters and seventy-odd panes of glass to a gross value of £3. 13*s*.[12] Far more extensive was the damage done to the Mansion House by crowds celebrating Wilkes's first election victory in Middlesex on the night of 28 March 1768. Nearly every lamp and window in the building was broken. One of the six glaziers com-

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[9] 'London Riots, 1736', 10; *Transactions* (1956), 103.

[10] See *Transactions* (1956), 102. I have found no trace of any such lists in the sessions records consulted; but, as arrests were frequently made as the result of information received some days after the event, it is not suggested that this is clear proof of their never having existed.

[11] 'Pulling down' rarely meant total destruction: most frequently it involved the pulling out of windows and smashing of shutters, banisters, doors, movable furniture and other accessible woodwork. Even in the Gordon Riots, when some 100 houses were 'pulled down', only about one-third of these were damaged substantially or beyond repair. Though personal effects were frequently burned in the streets, houses themselves were seldom fired. See also *Transactions* (1956), 95 n. 4, 100.

[12] 'London Riots, 1736', 9–10.

missioned to restore the damage later sent in an account for £20. 5s. 'to 136 Sash sqrs of the Best Crown Glass cont. 270 Ft....at 1s. 6d. per foot'; while the total cost incurred by the Mansion House Committee was no less than £174 in respect of glass and a further £30. 4s. 'to the supply of Lighting Lamps'.[13] Yet even this was small compared to the sums claimed as compensation by the victims of the Gordon Riots. Once the cumbrous machinery for levying the Riot Tax had been set in motion, eighty-one residents of the City of London and of the County of Middlesex were eventually paid a total of £63,269. 6s. to meet these claims; while, in Surrey, a further twenty-nine persons filed claims amounting to a little over £7000.[14] These amounts would, however, have been immeasurably greater if, during a week of almost undisturbed rioting, the demonstrators had not confined their attention to selected targets: it was, for example, only the conflagration spreading from Thomas Langdale's distilleries in Holborn and Field Lane that destroyed several non-Catholic houses—a result that had in no way been intended by the rioters.[15] Such discrimination was not peculiar to the Gordon Riots and appears in other social disturbances of the period.

There are certain features, too, common to the active participants in these events. In the first place, they rarely operated at any great distance from their local street or parish: in any given incident it was always the local people, and not the outsiders, that predominated. There were, of course, occasions when curiosity or partisan commitment drew large numbers from widely scattered parishes to some central meeting place or scene of operations. Thus, the crowds that gathered in St George's Fields on 10 May 1768, many of them in the expectation of seeing John Wilkes escorted from the King's Bench prison to Westminster, were drawn from a wide variety of parishes in London, Westminster, Middlesex and Surrey; and we find that several of those taking part in the assault on Newgate and King's Bench prisons during the Gordon Riots lived as far as from two to four miles distant from the scene of their present activities.[16] In the anti-Irish disturbances of July 1736, too, it appears that a part of the Spitalfields rioters, having completed their work locally, moved down into Whitechapel and joined or instigated those who, later that evening, attacked Irish dwellings and ale-houses in Goodman's Fields and Rosemary Lane.[17] Yet, even on this latter occasion, the majority of those arrested were local men; and it is remarkable how frequently persons brought to trial for presumed complicity in some incident were recognized by publicans and other local witnesses.[18] All this, of course, suggests both that the sphere of

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[13] Guild. Misc. (1957), 6. Cf. the Treasury award of £69. 4s. 7d. as compensation to Richard Capel and of £491. 5s. 6d. to Edward Russell, both Southwark magistrates, whose houses had been 'pulled down' after the 'massacre' of St George's Fields on 10 May 1768 (ibid. 11).

[14] Transactions (1956), 100; Guild. Misc. (1956), 33-7.

[15] Transactions (1956), 108.   [16] Ibid. 102-3, 103, n. 1.

[17] 'London Riots, 1736', 9 and n. 32.

[18] Ibid. 12-13; Transactions (1956), 103, n. 1.

operations of the itinerant bands was generally limited and that the element of spontaneity in these affairs was greater than contemporary comment would often allow; to this point we shall return later.

A more important consideration is the social and occupational composition of these crowds. Historians have been inclined to shrug them off with such ready-made labels as 'mobs', 'slum-dwellers', or 'criminal elements'. Contemporaries had more excuse for resorting to these generalized definitions; yet, on occasion, they were more precise, though not necessarily more exact, in their assessment. Thus, an anonymous informer of 1780 gave the following description of the Gordon rioters:

> 200 house brakers with tools;
> 550 pickpockets;
> 6000 of alsorts;
> 50 men that...gives them orders what to be done; they only come att night.[19]

With the aid of the judicial records of the period—imperfect and inadequate as they are—we may hope to present a more accurate picture. In the first place, they suggest that what Wilkes termed 'the inferior set' predominated among the participants in these riots—that is, not only wage-earners (journeymen, apprentices, labourers and 'servants'), but also craftsmen, shop-keepers and tradesmen; while 'gentlemen' and other middle-class elements were only occasionally to be found among them. But while this pattern is generally valid, there are significant differences in detail as between one riot and another. In the anti-Irish riots of 1736, as we might expect from their nature and origins, it was wage-earners that formed the dominant element. On this occasion, the initial impetus came from the English building workers engaged on the site of the new Church of St Leonard's, Shoreditch, many of whom had been dismissed by the contractor, William Goswell, and replaced by Irish labour from Shoreditch and Spitalfields at one-half or two-thirds of the Englishmen's wages; they were joined by local unemployed weavers who shared their grievance, as several master weavers had chosen to employ Irishmen at lower rates of pay. In the case of those arrested a few days later in Goodman's Fields, the emphasis was again on wage-earners: among seven of nine arrested persons whose occupations appear in the records, there were two craftsmen, two journeymen, two labourers and a brewer's servant.[20] Among the 'Wilkes and Liberty' demonstrators of 1768–9, elements other than wage-earners seem to have played a slightly larger part. Yet here, too, Horace Walpole picks out for special mention the Spitalfields weavers, who, he claimed, mustered in full strength in Piccadilly on the morning of the first Middlesex election, distributing blue cockades and papers inscribed, 'No. 45, Wilkes and Liberty'.[21] The East London coal-heavers also espoused Wilkes's

[19] Ibid. 103.   [20] 'London Riots, 1736', 12–13.
[21] The Letters of Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Orford, ed. P. Cunningham (9 vols., 1906), v, 91–2.

cause and, on the night of his surrender to his outlawry at the Court of King's
Bench, a large number of them, already engaged in a mortal dispute with an
unpopular coal-'undertaker', paraded the Ratcliffe Highway and New Gravel
Lane, Shadwell, shouting, 'Wilkes and Liberty, and coal-heavers for ever!'
and 'Damn you, light up your candles for Wilkes!' Yet these were only
passing phases in the weavers' and coal-heavers' wages movements of that
time, and no coal-heaver, and only one weaver, appears among those arrested
in the course of Wilkite riots. Wage-earners, however, are again much in
evidence: of thirty-seven persons arrested in such incidents and whose
occupations are given, a score or more appear to have been journeymen,
labourers or 'servants'; while the remainder included a dozen independent
craftsmen, shopkeepers and small manufacturers, two small merchants or
dealers, and two gentlemen.[22] Our documentation is considerably richer in
the case of the Gordon Riots. Here again, according to bystanders' reports,
certain occupations were in particular evidence among the demonstrators:
mention is, once more, made of the Spitalfields weavers (said to have mingled
with the 'respectable' middle-class folk of the Protestant Association in their
march from St George's Fields to Westminster), also of tanners, brewers'
draymen and sailors: the latter's presence is hardly surprising at a time when
Britain was at war with, or faced with the armed neutrality of, every other
major maritime Power. More precise, of course, is the evidence of the judicial
records. They give us the occupations of 110 of the 160 who were brought to
trial at the Old Bailey, in Southwark and at the Surrey Assizes. Of these, over
two in every three were wage-earners—journeymen, apprentices, waiters,
domestic servants and labourers; some twenty were small employers, petty
tradesmen or craftsmen; and two were professional men, if we may include in
this category Edward Dennis, the public executioner, who was sentenced to
death though (Dickens's account notwithstanding) never hanged.[23]

   Yet, whether wage-earners, independent craftsmen or petty employers or
traders, these rioters of 'the inferior set' had an important social feature in
common, which separates them from the 'middling sort' of people standing
directly above them in the social scale. It is that their names appear but rarely
among the householders listed in the parish Rate Books. In some two hundred
cases of persons arrested, committed to prison or brought to trial in the course
of these disturbances I have found the name of only one in the numerous Rate
Books or Land Tax registers of the period: he was John Bates, a brewer's
servant arrested at Goodman's Fields in July 1736.[24] This is certainly no
coincidence, nor is it due to any serious gaps in the records. Such there are,
of course; but, if we turn to the victims of the riots—those who had their
windows broken or their houses 'pulled down'—we find a very different
picture: while only two of seven victims of the anti-Irish riots of 1736 appear

[22] *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 8, 21–2.   [23] *Transactions* (1956), 95, 105–6.
[24] 'London Riots, 1736', 12, n. 42.

in such registers, every one of the known victims of the Wilkite disturbances of 1768–9 (admittedly few in number) is listed, and the names of no less than 111 out of 136 claimants for damages resulting from the Gordon Riots appear in the Poor Rate, Riot Tax and Land Tax registers of thirty parishes within the metropolitan area. [25] This merely serves to underline the sharp social differences that generally separated the London 'mob' from its selected victims—a factor of some significance, as we shall see later. Meanwhile, however, it would be wrong to conclude from the above that rioters on such occasions tended to be drawn from the poorest of the poor, from vagrants or homeless persons, or even from those shadowy 'criminal elements' that have such a fascination for certain writers. It is not proposed to re-examine the evidence here; suffice it to say that, in the Gordon Riots at least, comparatively few persons brought to trial were unemployed, all were of settled abode, few were given a bad character by witnesses, fewer still had previous convictions, and that of the many hundreds released from prison by the rioters the great majority were debtors rather than criminals.[26] Dickens, in fact, for all his romantic exaggeration of certain aspects of the riots, was not far from the truth when, in *Barnaby Rudge*, he wrote of a fair proportion of the participants as 'sober workmen';[27] nor, for that matter, was Horace Walpole when he repeatedly stressed the number of 'apprentices' involved.[28]

But why did the 'inferior set of people' engage in such activities? Contemporaries, who were singularly ill-informed on the origins of similar movements, tended to over-simplify the problem. While conceding that 'mobs' might be prompted by hunger, they were even more ready to believe that the desire for loot or drink acted as the major factor in such disturbances; any sort of social idealism or the dawning of political awareness, however rudimentary, was not seriously considered. The 'mobbish sort' being notoriously venal, bribery by interested parties was deemed a sufficient stimulant to touch off riot or rebellion. Sir Robert Walpole, however, tended to take a more cautious view. Of the riots in 1736 he wrote: 'It is said that money was dispersed'; 'but', he added, 'that does not as yett appear to be certain.'[29] In the Gordon Riots, there was plenty of talk of bribery and looting and the quest for cheap liquor—with some justification, it is true; but here, too, it was grossly exaggerated. Having witnessed the drunken orgies performed around Langdale's distilleries and the attacks on the prisons and the Bank of England, Horace Walpole concluded that the prime motive of the rioters was something other than religious zeal and wrote: 'The Pope need not be alarmed: the rioters thought more of plundering those of their own communion

[25] Ibid. 11, n. 38; *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 10, ns. 55 and 59, 13, n. 85; *Transactions* (1956), 109–10; *Guild. Misc.* (1956), 32–3, 32, n. 10.

[26] *Transactions* (1956), 104–6.   [27] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (1894), 133.

[28] *Letters*, VII, 387, 388, 390–1, 400.

[29] W. Coxe, *Memoirs of the Life and Administration of Sir Robert Walpole* (3 vols., 1798), III, 349–50.

than His Holiness's flock.'[30] The charge is plausible enough: there was considerable looting at Lord Mansfield's house in Bloomsbury Square, at Langdale's and at various public houses (by no means all run by Irishmen), and it seems probable that a fair proportion of the funds collected for the 'Protestant cause' or even for 'the poor Mob'—found its way into the wrong pockets. Yet the Assizes records show that only fifteen out of 160 persons brought to trial were specifically charged with looting; and of these only half were found guilty.[31] In the 'Wilkes and Liberty' movement of 1768–9, at least, the boot appears to have been on the other foot: the only sign of bribery that emerges is that of the two Irish chairmen, McQuirk and Balfe, whose group of rowdies seem to have been paid two guineas a head per week, allegedly by an agent of Lord Halifax, to 'protect' the Court candidate, Sir William Beauchamp Proctor, against the supporters of Serjeant Glynn.[32]

Companion to the charge of bribery in such cases was that of 'conspiracy': it was almost axiomatic that a 'hidden hand' should be sought behind all outbursts of popular violence. Lord Carteret's comments on the riots of 1736 in the Lords' debate on 10 February 1737 are of interest as being the very opposite of typical of the period in which they were voiced. 'The people', declared his Lordship, 'seldom or never assemble in any riotous or tumultuous Manner, unless when they are oppressed, or at least imagine they are oppressed.'[33] But Lord Carteret was speaking as a leader of the Opposition, anxious to press home an advantage. The Government could hardly be expected to be so sanguine; and Sir Robert Walpole, though he was prepared to acknowledge the presence of more immediate motives (such as 'the complaint of the Irish'), attributed all the varied disturbances of that year to the common origin of Jacobite agitation.[34] Others, his own agents among them, spoke darkly of 'high church' and 'popish priests'.[35] In 1768 no such explanations were put forward: 'that Devil Wilkes' was considered by King and Parliament alike as a sufficiently potent power for evil to stir the passions of the mobbish sort' without the aid of any outside agency. A similar compliment, however, was not paid to Lord George Gordon in June 1780. Though he and his Protestant Association were generally believed to have deliberately fostered the 'No Popery' disturbances for political ends, far more fantastic explanations of their origins were in circulation. It was said, for example,

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[30] *Letters*, VII, 400. More pointedly, he wrote to another correspondent: 'Anti-Catholicism seems not only to have had little, but even only a momentary, hand in the riots' (ibid. 407).

[31] For this point and a more detailed examination of the whole problem see *Transactions* (1956), 106–8.

[32] See the evidence of Robert Jones, Esq., J.P., of Fanmouth Castle, Glam., at McQuirk's and Balfe's subsequent trial for murder at the Old Bailey in Jan. 1769 (Old Bailey *Proceedings* (1769), 69, cit. in *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 13, n. 92).

[33] *Gent[leman's] Mag[azine]* (1737), 374.

[34] 'London Riots, 1736', 19–20.

[35] Ibid. 21.

that the Government had allowed the riots to develop as a pretext for calling in the Army and imposing Martial Law;[36] and lurid tales were current of French and American agents slipping across the Channel, distributing gold and instigating disturbance under cover of which an assault was to be made on Admiral Geary's fleet. But, though several of these tales were treated with all solemnity at the time, they were soon forgotten as serious explanations of the riots; and even Lord George Gordon was acquitted, when tried for treason at Westminster Hall, because it was not possible to convince a jury that he had deliberately planned the disturbances that followed from his speeches and activities.[37]

The ostensible causes of these movements are, of course, not in dispute: here, at least, we can see eye to eye with contemporary observers and commentators. Yet the motives underlying them were far from being so simple; and it is only by looking at these a little more closely that we shall get some picture of the deeper urges and impulses of the 'mob' of the eighteenth century. In July 1736, 'the first motive' (to quote Walpole) 'was the complaint of the Irish'; but, even after Mr Goswell, the offending contractor, had dismissed his Irish workmen and the master weavers had promised to do the same, the riots went on. Judging from the continued shouting of the slogan 'Down with the Irish!' when the movement spread to Whitechapel, this could only be because the grievance was long-standing and deep-felt. Yet it seems likely that the recent passing of the Gin Act, which threatened to tax the small gin-shops out of existence,[38] had something to do with it. Certainly, some of Walpole's informers held this view: one of them was told on the second day of the riots in Shoreditch 'that their meeting was to prevent the putting Down Ginn'. In early September, too, some weeks before the main campaign against the Act came to a head, threats were being voiced 'in the Tippling Ale houses and little Gin Shops' in Shoreditch against the lives of both Sir Robert himself and of the Master of the Rolls, Sir Joseph Jekyll, M.P., who had sponsored the Bill in Parliament.[39] Similarly, the campaign against the Gin Act itself, which followed in the wake of the anti-Irish disturbances in East London, appears to have drawn strength from the long-standing opposition of farmers, distillers and City merchants to Sir Robert Walpole's earlier proposals for a general Excise; fears were naturally expressed that the newly enacted duty on 'spirituous liquors' was but a further step in this direction.[40] This interplay of motive was, on occasion, well appreciated by contemporary

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[36] See, e.g., Horace Walpole's *Letters*, VII, 408.

[37] *Transactions* (1956), 100–2.

[38] The Act levied a duty of 20s. per gallon on all 'spirituous liquors' sold by retailers and obliged innkeepers, brandy-shopkeepers and others dealing in spirits to hold a £50 licence (*Commons Journals*, XII, 585–7).

[39] 'London Riots, 1736', 20–1, 14, 3–4.

[40] A circular letter addressed to a Mr Moor, distiller of Long Ditch, Westminster, claimed that the Gin Act 'struck at the very roots of Property' and was 'a prelude to general Excise next Session' (ibid. 16).

observers, as witness the following letter addressed to Walpole in early
September:

> It is evident that there are great discontents and murmurings through all this
> Mobbish part of the Town. The Gin Act and the Smuggling act sticks hard in the
> Stomachs of the meaner sort of People, and the Bridge act greatly Exasperates the
> Watermen insomuch that they make no scruple of declaring publiquely that they
> will join in any Mischief that can be set on foot.[41]

Finally, we must not leave out of account the possible effects on this 'Mobbish
part' of a recent rise in the price of wheat and bread: the quarter of wheat
in London rose sharply from 20s.–25s. in June to 26s.–36s. in July, falling
again slightly to 24s.–33s. in August–November.[42] We can, of course, only
speculate how far events were influenced by this factor.

A similar medley of motives appears to lie behind the Wilkes movement.
It is, of course, important to note that Wilkes performed the remarkable feat
of making a particular and distinctive appeal to three separate social groups—
to the merchants and householders of the City (men like Aldermen John
Sawbridge, James Townsend and Richard Oliver were, for a considerable
time, among his most fervent supporters); to the 'middling folk' among the
Middlesex freeholders; and (what concerns us more directly here) to the
'inferior set of people' in London, Westminster and Southwark. Unless, in
order to explain this phenomenon, we are to fall back on a conspiracy-cum-
bribery theory—for which there is no supporting evidence—we must assume
that Wilkes's personality, political principles (however lacking in originality),
and courageous defiance of authority had the power to evoke a more than
ephemeral response among not only large and small property-owners in City
and County, but among the small shopkeepers, craftsmen and wage-earners
as well. They had already, on more than one previous occasion, in the name
of 'Revolution principles', championed the cause of the City magistrates and
of the Earl of Chatham; and, in a sense, their 'adoption' of Wilkes was but
a logical sequel to the former popularity of Chatham. Yet, by this time,
political passions had become more deeply and widely aroused, the divisions
between Court and Opposition had grown apace, and Wilkes's own willing-
ness to tap the political energies of those normally untouched by parliamentary
or municipal contests must have contributed not a little to make this response
more widespread, more urgent and more sustained.[43]

In this case, the part played by social and economic factors emerges more
clearly; yet it is important to place them in their proper perspective. A feature
of the year 1768 was the almost simultaneous presentation of wages claims
by a wide variety of London trades. Historians have naturally been inclined

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[41] 'London Riots, 1736', 22.
[42] *Gent. Mag.* (1736), 357, 425, 489, 554, 612, 676. Unfortunately the price of the wheaten
peck-loaf (17 lb. 6 oz.), quoted daily at the Assize of Bread in London, is not given for this period.
[43] For a fuller discussion, see *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 23–4.

to relate these disputes to the political movement of the period, and one of Wilkes's biographers has even gone so far as to characterize them as an 'outbreak of political strikes'.[44] Yet, with the exception of the coal-heavers and weavers, who appear for a short while to have been caught up in the Wilkite movement, these workers do not seem to have been particularly affected by the current political agitation,[45] and the two movements should be seen as parallel rather than as closely related manifestations.[46] The high cost of living during the earlier months of 1768 certainly gave an impetus to both. The price of wheat had risen steadily since the end of 1767: having fallen temporarily from a peak of 50s. per quarter in July and October of that year to 44s. 9d. in December, it rose by stages to a new and higher peak of 50s. 6d. in May; the price of bread followed a similar, though less erratic, course.[47] Not surprisingly, we find the discontent that this aroused reflected in the agitation of the period. In mid-April, for instance, the Annual Register reported: '...a ½-penny loaf, adorned with mourning crape, was hung up at several parts of the Royal Exchange, with an inscription thereon, containing some reflections touching the high price of bread and other provisions';[48] and—even more significantly—demonstrators at the House of Lords on 10 May accompanied their chanting of the slogan 'Wilkes and Liberty!' with shouts of: 'We might as well be hanged as starved!'[49] But, after that, there was a sharp drop in wheat-prices to 31s. 9d. in January 1769, followed by slight rises in July–August and December; yet, generally, the price of wheat and bread in London remained low throughout 1769 and continued to be so in the early months of 1770.[50] In fact, for some time after the early summer of 1768, rising food-prices cease to be a factor for consideration; and the later phases of the 'Wilkes and Liberty' movement—including the excitement over the Middlesex election of December 1768 and the new outbreak of political rioting in London in March 1769—cannot be explained in such terms.

In the case of the Gordon Riots, while the famine-motive may have lurked in the background, there is no obvious evidence of dissatisfaction with low wages or high prices. For the first seven months of 1780, the price of the quarter of wheat did not rise above 30s. 8d.; and the price of the wheaten peck-loaf remained correspondingly low.[51] Here then, we must look to other factors for an explanation. In the first place, an examination of the documents confirms the first casual impression—that the riots were essentially an outburst

    [44] R. W. Postgate, That Devil Wilkes (2nd edn., 1956), 158.
    [45] Horace Walpole even wrote that sailors petitioning Parliament for higher wages on 11 May 'declared for the King and Parliament and beat down and drove away Wilkes's mob' (Letters, v, 100).
    [46] See Guild. Misc. (1957), 15–20.   [47] Ibid. 23.
    [48] Annual Register (1768), 96.
    [49] Cit. John Brooke, The Chatham Administration 1766–1768 (1957), 357–8.
    [50] Guild. Misc. (1957), 23.
    [51] The price of the wheaten peck-loaf, 2s. 9d. in Oct.–Nov. 1767 and Feb.–July 1768, was 1s. 11d. in Jan.–June 1780 and only rose to 2s. in July (ibid. 23, n. 192).

of anti-Catholicism, expressing the deep, traditional hatred of Popery (with all its associations) and the panic-fear that, under cover of war with the Catholic Powers of France and Spain, both 'Protestant religion' and 'Revolution principles' would be swept aside.[52] This conclusion emerges not only from the repeated chanting of the 'No Popery' slogan at every stage of the riots and the obvious priority accorded by the rioters to Catholic chapels and schools; but, even more strikingly, from a closer study of the victims of the attacks. While these were far from all being Roman Catholics, it appears none the less that nearly every one of the claimants of substantial sums for compensation were either Papists, persons actively engaged in quelling the disturbances, or the owners or occupiers of buildings damaged in the course of assaults made on Catholic property.[53] The primary motive, then, was political-religious; but the way in which the blow was directed against the Roman Catholic community and its defenders suggests that it had a distinct social bias as well.

There was no indiscriminate attack made on the Roman Catholic population as a whole; had this been so, the main assault would have been against the humble Catholic communities of St Giles in the Fields and St Sepulchre, Holborn; of St Giles, Cripplegate, and St Luke, Old Street; and, above all, against the lodgers, labourers, riverside workers and weavers of Whitechapel, Wapping and St George in the East. The lists of claimants for damages show us that once the priest and the schoolmaster had been dealt with, it was the gentleman, the manufacturer, the merchant or the publican, rather than the craftsman or wage-earner, who was the main object of the rioters' attention.[54] This impression is confirmed by the Rate Books and Land Tax registers of the parishes concerned. Of 111 claimants whose rents are listed, only nine paid or were assessed for rents of less than £10 a year, and nearly two in every three paid rents of £20 or more; the average rent paid was a little over £34.[55] In fact, they were householders of some substance and hardly typical of London's 14,000 Catholics as a whole. This element of social protest, while by no means peculiar to the Gordon Riots, is one of their more remarkable features.[56]

We may now attempt to draw some general conclusions. First, as to the composition and behaviour of these 'mobs'. We have seen that they shared certain common traditions of behaviour, with their ready resort to such activities as house-'breaking', window-smashing, burning their victims in effigy, parading under recognised 'captains', hallooing, huzzaing, slogan-shouting and so forth. Yet they appear as socially identifiable crowds of men and women and do not correspond to the static-abstract picture of the 'mob' presented by hostile contemporary witnesses or later historians. Above all, they were not simply passive instruments of outside agents or conspirators,

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[52] *Transactions* (1956), 112–13.   [53] Ibid. 107–8.
[54] Ibid. 108–9.   [55] *Guild. Misc.* (1956), 32–3.
[56] For further evidence see *Transactions* (1956), 111–12.

whether Government, Opposition, Jacobite, Wilkite or Franco-American. Of course, they borrowed the ideas of their heroes of the hour—men such as Chatham and Wilkes, or even Lord George Gordon—but to present this aspect alone is to give a one-sided picture and to ignore the particular grievances and social impulses of the 'inferior set of people', which were by no means the same as those of the 'middling sort', such as voted for Wilkes in Middlesex or that rallied to St George's Fields at the summons of Lord George Gordon; still less were they those of the City merchants or members of the Opposition in Parliament. We must now look at this factor a little more closely.

First of all, there were the social and economic grievances. Wages, as we have seen, played an important part in the anti-Irish riots of July 1736 and influenced one phase, at least, of the Wilkes movement of 1768–9. It would, of course, require a far more detailed study of wages movements during the period as a whole than has here been attempted to determine how far this was a general underlying grievance. High food prices were a more likely common source of dissatisfaction, as they affected all small consumers; but they were certainly not a continuous cause of complaint, as we can see from our study of the disturbances under review and from a brief glance at the fluctuations in the price of bread and wheat in the course of the century. In London, wheat prices were high—or appreciably above average—in 1736, 1740, 1756–8, 1766–8, 1772–3, 1775, 1777 and in 1793–5.[57] Yet, taking the period as a whole, there was not in London—as there was in English rural districts and, for that matter, in Paris both before and during the Revolution—a close general concordance between high food prices and popular disturbance.[58]

A more generalised social grievance must have lain behind the more or less spontaneous protest of rich against poor which we have noted as a feature of certain of these outbreaks. A similar desire to achieve some rough kind of social justice is evident in the Wilkes riots of March 1768, when the windows of lords and ladies of opulence and fashion were smashed with gay abandon: the names of the victims read almost like a page from Debrett.[59] And it is no doubt significant that in the course of such outbreaks we do not find any clear distinction made by the rioters between Government and Opposition members.[60]

Equally significant is the emergence of a nucleus of ideas and impulses not limited to the satisfaction of immediate material needs. One of the most frequently recurring themes in the popular ideology of this time was that of the Englishman's 'liberty'. The belief that Englishmen were 'free' and not

[57] For prices of bread and wheat, see the *Gent. Mag.* for the appropriate years.
[58] For English rural and provincial riots of the period, see R. W. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century* (1945), chaps. 1–3; for Paris, see my *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959).
[59] *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 5–6.
[60] *Transactions* (1956), 100–1; *Guild. Misc.* (1957), loc. cit.

'slaves', and did not starve or wear 'wooden shoes'—such as foreigners in general and Papists in particular—was strongly entrenched, and had been so since the religious and social conflicts of the previous century. The view finds an echo in the riots of 1736, though, in this case, it appears to have been voiced by the 'middling' rather than by the 'mobbish' sort. The 'Liberty and Property' slogan was heard in the Shoreditch riots in July; and, in September, while the campaign against the Gin Act was at its height, a circular letter addressed to London distillers declared: 'If we are English-men let us show that we have English spirits and not tamely submit to the yoak just ready to be fastened about our necks.... Let them [Sir Robert Walpole and Sir Joseph Jekyll, M.P.] see that *wooden shoes* are not so easy to be worn as they imagine.'[61] This concept of 'liberty', of course, runs through the Wilkes movement as a whole and here it is essentially a popular slogan. It is significant, no doubt, that Sir William Proctor should have found it expedient to adopt it at Brentford in December 1768, where it was reported that arm-bands issued by the Court candidate bore the inscription 'Liberty and Proctor!'[62] In the Gordon Riots, we find another form of this assertion of an Englishman's liberties—this time, by the property-owners and house-holders of the City of London. They demanded the right to set up voluntary associations commanded by their own officers in order to protect their rights and properties both against the depredations of the rioters and the encroach-ment of government—a sort of citizens' militia, or *milice bourgeoise*, nine years before the siege of the Bastille![63] A similar spirit of sturdy independence and hostility to the executive was shown in the flat refusal of a majority of the City companies to contribute financially to the upkeep of troops quartered in the City during the disturbances.[64]

Closely related to the theme of 'liberty' and similarly linked with 'wooden shoes' was the theme of 'No Popery'. In popular ideology, at least, this had as strong a political as a religious bias and probably derived equally from memories of seventeenth-century conflicts and of 'the Good Old Cause'. It appears in all three of these movements. In 1736, the rioters' slogan in Goodman's Fields, 'King George for ever and down with the Irish!' was countered by a shout of 'King George and no Popery!' from Walpole's agent, John Ibutt, and his friends.[65] In 1774, both Wilkes and Serjeant Glynn, as

[61] Coxe, op. cit. III, 349; 'London Riots, 1736', 15–16 (my italics.)
[62] *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 13.
[63] *Guild. Misc.* (1956), 38 ff. The St Marylebone Associates, headed as they were by seven noblemen and fifty-seven gentlemen and esquires, were more in the nature of a *milice aristo-cratique* (ibid. 40–1).
[64] See the Court Minutes for July–Oct. 1780 of the Apothecaries, Barber-Surgeons, Blacksmiths, Butchers, Carpenters, Cordwainers, Dyers and Fishmongers (Guild. Lib., MSS. 8201/13, 5258/8, 6443/9, 4329/20, 7353/7, 4329/20, 8154/4, 5571/4). Among twenty-two Companies whose Court Minutes and/or Account Books I have examined for this period and for this purpose, the Upholders at first voted £20 towards the cost of the upkeep of troops and later rescinded it (MS. 7141/2), and the Grocers alone seem to have been fully co-operative (MSS. 7302/10, 7305/1).   [65] 'London Riots, 1736', 9.

M.P.s for Middlesex, felt obliged to give a pledge to their constituents to work for the repeal of the Quebec Act, 'establishing Popery' and French Laws in Canada; the demand was backed by the City's Common Council and the Earl of Chatham, and supported by popular demonstrations at the House of Commons.[66] The riots of 1780 provided, of course, a more striking example; yet it is sometimes wrongly supposed that, in this case, active support for the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act and for the 'No Popery' demand was confined to the 'lunatic fringe' around Lord George Gordon and the Protestant Association, to the irresponsible London 'mob' and the associates of John Wesley. This was, in fact, far from being the case. The Protestant Association's campaign had stirred a response among those professing the most traditional and secular of 'Revolution principles' in the City of London. Four days before the riots the Lime Street Ward, by unanimous vote, instructed its Alderman, Sir Watkin Lewes, and its Common Council men to press for repeal; and two days later, the Common Council followed suit and even urged their demand on Parliament, supported by a deputation on 7 June—when the riots were at their height.[67] Little wonder that magistrates were chary of risking their necks or reputations in order to protect Catholic property or that troops were unwilling to fire on citizens engaged in destroying Catholic chapels and schools![68] In this sense, of course—though not in every other— the Gordon Riots fall within the main Whig-Radical tradition and are not just a crazy, isolated phenomenon. The same theme of anti-Popery persists as a live political issue as late as the General Election of 1830.[69]

Another related theme is chauvinism, or hostility to foreigners—particularly, though by no means exclusively, to those from Catholic countries. Anti-Irish agitation was sustained by religious differences, historical memories and the importation of cheap labour from Ireland. The latter consideration was, no doubt, predominant in the East London disturbances of 1736 and in the Covent Garden riots of 1763;[70] the former in 1780. In this case, several Irish public houses were wrecked in Golden Lane and Southwark, and the choice of Irish witnesses for the Crown in one of the trials that followed at St Margaret's Hall led to a lively exchange between defence counsel and prosecution.[71] Yet, as we have noted, there was clearly no attempt to make a wholesale and indiscriminate attack on the Irish Catholic population. In 1768, the position was more confused: on the one hand, Wilkes received considerable support among Irish coal-heavers and weavers; on the other,

[66] *Gent. Mag.* (1774), 283, 444; (1775), 348; W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (7 vols., 1906), IV, 299–300. The Earl of Shelburne was repeating this demand as late as June 1780 (I. R. Christie, *The End of North's Ministry 1780–1782* (1958), 25).

[67] *Guild. Misc.* (1956), 37.   [68] *Transactions* (1956), 96, 113.

[69] Norman Gash, 'English Reform and the French Revolution in the General Election of 1830', in *Essays presented to Sir Lewis Namier*, 258–88.

[70] M. D. George, *London Life in the XVIII Century* (1925), 117–19.

[71] *Transactions* (1956), 110.

it was Irish chairmen who threw in their lot—at a price, it is true!—with
Sir William Proctor at Brentford.

Anti-Scottish feeling was shorter-lived. Whatever its exact origins, it was
strong in the 1760's and was ably exploited by Wilkes in the *North Briton*
and after the 'massacre' of St George's Fields. It was certainly not confined
to London: Sir Lewis Namier gives an interesting example from the Canter-
bury election of 1761, when Bute's 'Whig' candidate is opposed by local
Tories with the slogan, 'No Scotch—no foreigner!'[72] But it was clearly
a diminishing asset after Bute's retirement from the scene. In the Gordon
Riots, for example, it was the Scots that gave the lead to London in destroying
Papist chapels, and Lord George Gordon himself was a Scot. It is no doubt
significant of a change in popular mood (as well as of Wilkes's conversion to
more sober habits) that neither Wilkes nor any other determined opponent
of the riots sought to exploit this fact.

The deepest hostility was, with little doubt, reserved for the French and
Spaniards, who were not only Papists but traditional national enemies. In
the course of the St George's Fields affray of May 1768—when Britain was at
peace—a soldier was heard to say that he would never shoot at Englishmen,
though he was ready to fire on Frenchmen and Spaniards at any time.[73] The
same hostility came to the surface again in the protests against the Quebec
Act of 1774.[74] It was more violently expressed in the Gordon Riots, though
this is hardly surprising as, by this time, Britain was at war with both France
and Spain. Frenchmen, wrote a French diarist, did not dare show their faces
in the streets of London; and the Portuguese Lebarty was told: 'I'll have your
house down, you outlandish bouger!'[75] Hostility to France was once more
evident in the campaign against the Eden–Vergennes Treaty of 1786 and
may have played some part in the Birmingham and Manchester 'Church and
King' riots of 1791–2. By contrast, there is little evidence, during the Gordon
Riots, though they took place at the height of the American War of Inde-
pendence, of any anti-American feeling among the 'mobbish sort'. Pro-
Americanism, too, seems to have been confined to higher social circles and
does not appear as an expression of popular opinion.

Yet it was from elements such as these, tenuous and even irrelevant as
they may appear, that there gradually developed a mass basis for the Radical
movement of the later eighteenth century. There has been a tendency to trace
the origins of such a movement almost exclusively to the political awakening
of the 'middling sort' of people—Middlesex freeholders, City liverymen and
the like—while the 'mob' in London as elsewhere is left out of the picture,
except in so far as it is represented as indulging in dangerous diversionary

[72] Sir Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1957), 101–2.
[73] *Guild. Misc.* (1957), 10, n. 53.
[74] Lecky, loc. cit.; *Gent. Mag.* (1774), 283, 444.
[75] *Transactions* (1956), 113, n. 1.

activities like the Gordon Riots or in blind outbursts motivated by hunger or the quest for loot. Yet this is a profound mistake. Hardy's Corresponding Society of 1792 (composed of similar elements to those who shouted 'Wilkes and Liberty!' and 'pulled down' Catholic chapels) could hardly have appeared without a sustained political tradition behind it. The crucial years are perhaps 1768–9: the period of the General Election of March 1768,[76] of the various contests in Middlesex, of the founding of the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights and—most crucial for the 'inferior set of people' in London—the years of the fullest flowering of the 'Wilkes and Liberty' agitation. It is, of course, only too easy to exaggerate its maturity: at this stage, it is by no means a fully-fledged political movement in which devotion to a set of political principles is in greater evidence than attachment to the person of a popular leader or hero. It was only later that such concepts as 'liberty' became clothed in the more tangible form of demands for Annual Parliaments, the rights of electors, or the extension of the franchise—demands as yet only voiced by the higher social strata of freeholders, City merchants and tradesmen. The American War may have hastened the process in the long run, though appeals by Wilkes and others to the common people fell off steeply after October 1774, when Wilkes was elected Lord Mayor at his third attempt. After that, there was the refusal of Lord Mayor Sawbridge in 1776 to allow the Navy to impress men in the City;[77] but, generally speaking, no attempt was made to enlist the sympathies of the 'mobbish sort' for the views of the pro-American elements in the City. And, as is well known, the Gordon Riots—though by no means marking a complete break with a Radical tradition—discouraged any further appeals of this kind for a decade to come: Dr Sutherland quotes a city worthy, Joseph Brasbridge, as saying—'From that moment...I shut my ears against the voice of popular clamour';[78] and Wilkes himself had by this time, quite apart from the riots, become a thoroughly respectable citizen with a safe seat in the Commons and a lucrative City sinecure and was not likely to bother himself any more with appeals to the 'inferior set'. So the political development of the London 'mob' had to proceed by other means. How far the Westminster election of 1784 contributed to the process it would be hard to say, as it would be to estimate how far London craftsmen and working men were influenced by the opening stages of the French Revolution or the factory system, just then beginning in the North; but it is evident that the more thoughtful of them were touched by the writings of Tom Paine. In fact, with the founding of Hardy's Corresponding Society in 1792, a stable base seems at last to have been found for the Radical movement among the petty craftsmen and wage-earners of the metropolis.

[76] See S. Maccoby, *English Radicalism 1762–1785* (1955), 79–88.
[77] *Gent. Mag.* (1776), 528. Within a month, however, under Sawbridge's successor, Sir Thomas Halifax, the Press gangs were once more freely operating in the City (ibid. 530).
[78] Cit. Dr L. S. Sutherland, op. cit. 73.

This takes us, of course, a long way beyond the groping, tentative and immature displays of 1736, and even of 1768. Much work needs to be done to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of the subject—including the role of the 'mob' in the outcry over Excise, during the Jacobite agitation of the 1740's, at the time of Chatham's ascendancy, or in 1784. Again, we need to pay more attention to factors like Irish immigration and the growth of London's population; and, perhaps even more important, to the influence exerted on the 'mobbish sort' by the 'middling sort' of people—such as those who supported Wilkes in Middlesex and the City of London; who escorted Crosby and Oliver to Parliament and the Tower in the course of the City–Commons dispute over the publication of parliamentary debates; who gave such solid backing to Beckford and other City 'Patriots'; and who formed the rank and file of Lord George Gordon's Protestant Association. This would enable us to draw more confident conclusions; but, even within the limitations of our present knowledge, we may tentatively suggest that the first beginnings of this mass Radical movement should be sought in these immature, groping, and often violent, efforts of the common people of London to express themselves in social and political terms.