

Almost Revolutionaries: The London Apprentices during the Civil Wars

Author(s): Steven R. Smith

Source: *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 313-328

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3817210>

Accessed: 19-12-2017 01:04 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Pennsylvania Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Huntington Library Quarterly*

Almost Revolutionaries: the London Apprentices during the Civil Wars

By STEVEN R. SMITH

PARTICULARLY SINCE THE turbulent decade of the nineteen-sixties, historians have given a good deal of attention to the revolt of youth and generational conflict in the modern world. Early modern English society was quite different from the modern world, but there are some parallels between recent revolts of youth and the activities of the young men of London during the civil war era. In the turbulent forties of the seventeenth century, young men became actively involved in politics on several occasions. This paper will briefly describe some of those occasions and then will analyze this political activism. The several thousands of apprentices in London made up a youthful subculture which displayed many of the psychological characteristics ascribed to modern adolescents. Their ages ranged from the midteens to the early twenties, and their social composition was almost as broad as that of the entire kingdom, for apprenticeship was required of all those who wished to enter any of the crafts and trades. Though a disproportionate number came from London and the surrounding counties, they were drawn from the entire country.¹ Thus, except for their age and their semi-dependent status, the apprentices were a microcosm of England, showing the same political divisions and uncertainties as the rest of the population.

Historians have long recognized the important role that London played in the Puritan Revolution, though they have found it difficult to supply the details of how the crowds were organized and led. While much of the political activism of the City of London and its suburbs was not confined to young people, it is possible to describe some of the riots, demonstrations, and petitions of the apprentices, who had a long tradition of rioting in London. Their opposition to the political and religious policies of the government had become evident even before the meeting of the Short Parliament in 1640. In June of 1639, they responded to a plea for support from John Lilburne, who had been imprisoned.² This clash between apprentices and the authorities put the young men on record as opponents of Archbishop William Laud, who was blamed for Lilburne's arrest, and was a preview for the more serious anti-Laud riot which occurred less than a year later.

¹Steven R. Smith, "The Social and Geographical Origins of the London Apprentices, 1630-1660," *Guildhall Miscellany*, IV (Apr. 1973), 195-206.

²Pauline Gregg, *Free-born John: A Biography of John Lilburne* (London, 1961), pp. 77-78. *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic* (hereafter CSPD) 1639-40, p. 2.

Shortly before the dissolution of the Short Parliament on May 5, 1640, the privy council learned of rumors that the archbishop's palace was to be attacked and burned if Parliament were dissolved. A few days later, broadsides appeared around London calling on the apprentices to attack Lambeth Palace on the following Monday. Thus there was adequate warning and time to prepare for the attack; so that when it did occur, the palace was well protected and the attack unsuccessful. However, this incident was only the beginning; during the following week disturbances continued in and around the City. On Thursday the king and council issued instructions to the lord mayor warning of the likelihood of a repetition of the attack on Lambeth and directing that the trained bands be kept in readiness. At the same time orders were issued for the transfer of John Archer, one of those arrested after the Monday riot, from the White Lion Prison in Southwark to the more secure Tower of London. The attack on White Lion Prison occurred on Friday, and the lord mayor was directed to send the trained bands into Southwark to stop the riots. The lords lieutenant of Middlesex and Surrey were also ordered to call out the trained bands of those counties for use in suppressing the tumults. On Friday a royal proclamation was issued for "repressing and punishing" those involved in the attack on Lambeth Palace and naming several individuals believed to have been involved. During the following week, the London and Middlesex trained bands were again ordered to stand by to deal with possible "outrages and insolences."³

On May 23, 1640, some of the apprentices arrested earlier were questioned about their roles in the riots. Richard Beaumont, an apprentice to James James, an apothecary, said that he had been in bed during the disturbances and had gone to Southwark on Friday morning only to deliver some medicine for his master. He did relate a number of rumors he had heard about the rioting, including the report that Laud kept a crucifix on his communion table and that he bowed toward the altar. Another of James's apprentices, Edmund Wilson, admitted that he had known of the plans to attack Lambeth Palace but denied that he had participated. He defended his fellow apprentice Beaumont, saying Beaumont had told him that the wise would stay home on the fourteenth (the day of the attack). Beaumont and, presumably, the others were released later on bond. In July another apprentice, Edward David, suspected "of being one of the disordered apprentices," petitioned the privy council for his release from jail, where he had been held since May 11. Two others

³*CSPD, 1639-40*, pp. 88, 161-162, 167-168, 172, 201. Bulstrode Whitelocke, *Memorials of the English Affairs from the Beginning of the Reign of Charles the First to the Happy Restoration of King Charles the Second*, new ed. (Oxford, 1853), I, 99-100. William Laud, *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, William Laud, D.D.* (Oxford, 1853), III, 235. *Tudor and Stuart Proclamations*, ed. Robert Steele (Oxford, 1910), item 1817.

LONDON APPRENTICES

involved in the riots were not so fortunate. John Archer was tortured before being executed, and Thomas Bensted, a sixteen-year-old mariner, was hanged, drawn, and quartered after being convicted of treason.⁴

In the spring of 1641 the apprentices joined with adults in the riots and demonstrations directed against the earl of Strafford, but it was not until the antibishop riots toward the end of that year that the young men seem to have formed distinctive crowds again. In late December the rioters, especially the apprentices, turned on the newly appointed lieutenant of the Tower, Colonel Thomas Lunsford. The culmination of this series of riots came in January 1642, when after the abortive attempt to arrest six members of Parliament the apprentices offered themselves as a special guard for Parliament. This particular series of riots is interesting, because there were accusations that some prominent Londoners and members of the House of Commons were involved in instigating the riots. Those accused included John Venn and Isaac Penington, members of the House of Commons; Richard Salwey and Samuel Barnardiston, sons of MPs; Cornelius Burges, a popular London preacher; and Sir Richard Wiseman. When some members of the House of Commons raised questions about these accusations, John Pym, the leader of the Puritan forces in the House, cut off the debate by implying that such charges were part of a conspiracy to divide and weaken the "well-affected." Some contemporaries thought that Pym himself was responsible for the tumults, and at least one of his biographers has accepted his involvement.⁵

The ideas and objectives of the apprentices in the antibishop riots can be found in a petition which was presented to Parliament on December 23, 1641. This petition, it was claimed, had been signed by thirty thousand apprentices and "others whose times of apprenticeship are lately expired." The petitioners expressed grave concern about the economic situation and feared that the troubled times were about "to nip us in the bud." Roman Catholics, especially those who remained in Parliament, were blamed for the problems of the country. Ireland, where the native Roman Catholic population had recently rebelled, causing rumors of massacres of Protestants there, was held up as an example of what England would suffer

⁴State Papers, Domestic, Charles I: MS 16-453/16, 453/112.1, 453/39, 41-42, *CSPD*, 1640, pp. 201, 210, 469. Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *Archbishop Laud, 1573-1645*, 2nd ed. (London, 1965), pp. 388-389.

⁵*Persecutio Undecima: The Church's Eleventh Persecution* (London, 1648). *A Complaint to the House of Commons* (Oxford, 1642). Sir Philip Warwick, *Memoirs of the Reign of King Charles I* (London, 1813), p. 204. Sir Simonds D'Ewes, *The Journal of Sir Simonds D'Ewes, from the First Recess of the Long Parliament to the Withdrawal of King Charles from London*, ed. Wilsen Havelock Coates, Yale Hist. Pubs., XVIII (New Haven, 1942), 213-216. Ralph Verney, *Verney Papers: Notes of Proceedings in the Long Parliament*, ed. John Bruce, Camden Soc. XXXI (London, 1845), 129. Clarendon State Papers, Bodleian Lib., Vol. 21, fol. 129. *A Letter from Mercurius Civicus to Mercurius Rusticus* (London, 1643). C. E. Wade, *John Pym* (London, 1912), pp. 268-270, 272-274, 292-293.

if the papists were not eliminated from Parliament and the recusancy laws strictly enforced.⁶ Two other petitions presented in December contained similar complaints about conditions in England and Ireland. One began by deploring the situation in London, with its many “schismatical disturbances” and abuses of liberty. It cited Ireland as an example of what Roman Catholics would do to Protestants if given the opportunity; but in this petition the apprentices also called attention to the fact that many of their masters had invested money in Ireland, a further reason for suppressing the rebellion there. This petition also complained about the bishops, especially Archbishop Laud (who, it charged, was guilty of “many great and insufferable crimes”), and demanded that the bishops be curbed in power and that they be removed from the House of Lords. The apprentices also voiced one of their traditional grievances, the presence of foreigners in London. These men, who had not served apprenticeships, would become competitors to the apprentices, and they also aggravated London’s housing problems.⁷

The other December petition began with this complaint about foreigners, then moved to a grievance which was unique to apprentices: “Of late have our mistresses gotten such predominancy over us, as if that we were bound to them not to our masters.” Another denied that the apprentices were guilty of disorderliness on holidays, though they were traditionally blamed for it. The petition denounced the calling out of the trained bands on such occasions as an insult to the apprentices, “whose bloods are mingled with the nobility, although it were our fortune to be younger brothers.” The petition concluded with a reference to Ireland, complaining about the competition of Irish tradesmen as well as the political and religious situation there.⁸

It would be interesting to know how many persons were arrested and prosecuted for participating in the tumults during the winter of 1641-1642, and how many of those were actually apprentices. Unfortunately the extant records reveal very little. Only a few judicial records for the City of London survive from this period. Among the records for the Middlesex sessions of the peace, there are a few references to persons implicated in riots during these months. For example, in the list of prisoners held in the Gatehouse on January 11, 1642, are the names of John Noy, who was committed on December 31, “charged with the speaking of dangerous words in urging

⁶*To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty and the Parliament . . . the Petition of the Apprentices* (London, 1641), *Journal of the House of Commons*, II, 354.

⁷*The Apprentices of London’s Petition* (London, 1641).

⁸*The Petition of the Women of Middlesex . . . with the Apprentices of London’s Petition* (London, 1641). The women’s petition was a satire, not presented to Parliament. This raises the possibility that the apprentices’ petition printed here was also satirical, though other parts of the pamphlet were not. Even if the apprentices’ petition were a satire, the issues raised were certainly important to the apprentices.

LONDON APPRENTICES

four or five hundred men to pull down Whitehall and Westminster,” and Edmund Grigg, arrested on January 3 (the day of the attempted arrest of the six members). It was charged “that he with other apprentices did in a most riotous and disorderly manner break down the windows of George Cross, vintner, and there carried away plate and certain parcels of goods.” Several other persons were required to appear at the January 13 session of the peace to answer charges of having broken into Cross’s house, but there is no way to determine whether this incident was part of the politically oriented rioting or simply one of the many cases of theft the justices had to deal with.⁹ The term “riot” was used to cover a variety of offenses in addition to political activity; thus, these and the few other surviving indictments for riot may or may not reflect the political activity of the apprentices.

The petitions and the demonstrations and riots which occurred in London and Westminster during December of 1641 and January of 1642 suggest that the apprentices generally supported the parliamentary cause and opposed the policies of the king. Yet, once the civil war had begun, there was a division in the ranks of the apprentices. Some took active roles in the peace movement which blossomed in the winter of 1642-1643, while others opposed that movement. In December 1642 a petition calling for peace was circulated among the apprentices and was presented to the House of Lords in January, but only after a street fight with an opposing group of apprentices. The peace petition said that the civil war was impoverishing the country, draining both blood and money from England and threatening everyone with “the merciless tyranny of famine, sickness and invasion.” It pointed out that many London apprentices had already lost their lives in the fighting and that many others had been ruined by the loss of their masters. The young men concluded by imploring Parliament to work for peace “to the glory of God, the good of his Majesty, the preservation of Parliaments” and the relief of the Protestants in Ireland. Another group of apprentices immediately denounced this peace effort and presented a counter petition pledging unflagging support for Parliament. A brief pamphlet war ensued between the two factions.¹⁰

During the next several years there were occasional riots and petitions by the apprentices, but it was not until the summer of 1647 that another major outbreak of youthful political activism took place. In July of that year a group of apprentices acting in conjunction with, and perhaps directed by, the leaders of the Presbyterian faction in the House of Commons and the London Common Council, actually seized control of

⁹Middlesex Sessions of the Peace: Sessions Rolls: 903/55; 904/25, 31, 92; 905/119. Gaol Delivery Records: 4/384.

¹⁰*To the Parliament: The Petition of the Well-affected Prentices* (London, 1642). *An Humble Declaration of the Apprentices and Other Young Men* (London, 1643). M. Webb, *The Malignants’ Conventicle* (London, 1643). *A True Remonstrance of the Upright Apprentices of London* (London, 1643).

Parliament and purged the House of Commons of its Independent, pro-Army speaker and several members. From the beginning of 1647 the Presbyterians had been attempting to reduce both the size and the political influence of the Army as a part of their overall scheme to create a system in which the king was to be checked by Parliament and the professional army by a civilian militia. As the Presbyterians maneuvered against the Independents and the Army, the apprentices were conducting a campaign of their own which paralleled the larger political issue and was an important part of the background for the July riots. Beginning in the winter of 1647, the apprentices attempted to obtain a holiday for themselves to replace the discarded religious holidays. In a petition of February 9 they appealed to the sabbatarianism of Parliament, arguing that without a proper holiday they were likely to use the Sabbath for recreation. Two days later they appealed to the lord mayor, aldermen, and common council for support, combining the request for the holiday with another complaint about the large number of foreigners in London. The holiday was also mentioned in a petition of March 1, but this was an Independent petition concerned primarily with political questions, expressing the fear that there were some in the kingdom who were about to obtain "by policy [that] which they had not been able to do by force," and asking that all those who had supported the enemy be deprived of office and franchise and that a "trusty and sufficient" guard be provided for the nation.¹¹

The demand for a holiday continued to occupy the apprentices but attracted little attention in Parliament. To impress their views on Parliament, the apprentices met in Covent Garden on April 20 and went from there to the House of Commons, where they inquired into the fate of their petitions. The Commons appointed a committee to draw up an ordinance granting the holiday.¹² Yet there was further delay, and in early June some apprentices decided that additional action was required. A mass meeting of apprentices was scheduled for June 8; but apparently the threat alone was sufficient, for on that very day an ordinance was passed providing for an apprentices' holiday on the second Tuesday of each month.¹³

A pamphlet which appeared early in June cited the holiday as evidence of the respect and esteem that Parliament had for apprentices. This

¹¹*Two Humble Petitions of the Apprentices of London* (London, 1647). *The Humble Petitions of Many Thousands of Young Men and Apprentices* (London, 1647).

¹²Clarendon State Papers, Bodleian Library, Vol. 29, fol. 195. Whitelocke, *Memorials*, II, 133. *Journal of the House of Commons*, V, 148.

¹³Common Hall Book, Vol. II, fol. 62^r. Clarendon State Papers, Bodleian Library, Vol. 29, fol. 236. *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, ed. Sir Charles Firth and R. S. Rait (London, 1911), I, 954.

LONDON APPRENTICES

pamphlet, *The Honor of London Prentices*, is one of the best examples of the apprentices' pride in their order and their aspirations to glory. The long poem of praise argued that those apprentices who had fought for the parliamentary cause had fought for religious purity, for political liberty, for fundamental law, and for the rights of Parliament, but not against the king. In fact, the long history of the apprentices' valor demonstrated that they had always fought in behalf of "an hereditary honor."¹⁴

During the next few weeks after the approval of the holiday ordinance, riots and demonstrations erupted in London, some favoring the Presbyterian cause and some in behalf of the Independents. The pro-Independent, and, therefore, pro-Army, apprentices expressed their position in a broadside which appeared on July 9, claiming that there was plenty of money to pay the soldiers, warning of "Scottish dangerous designs," and asserting that the Parliament intended to disband the army by "fraudulent practices, knowing that when they disband, they are at their mercy."¹⁵ Later a petition from a group of apprentices to Sir Thomas Fairfax reminded the general of their past faithfulness and pledged their continued support and affection. The petition, however, warned that the liberty for which they had fought was in danger of being sacrificed and complained about the removal of certain London militia officers.¹⁶ This complaint referred to a change which had occurred in May, when a new militia committee was appointed for London, excluding several prominent Independents. The reorganized London militia was viewed by some as the nucleus of a pro-Presbyterian, parliamentary military force, which would be augmented by veterans from the army of the earl of Essex. The resistance of the Independents and the Army to the Presbyterian program had forced the Presbyterians to create their own military force and to enter into negotiations with the Scots for military aid. It may well have been that the Presbyterians had granted the apprentices their holiday in the hope of securing the valuable aid of the young men in their struggle with the Independents. If that be true, it is ironic that on the first of those holidays a group of apprentices demonstrated their support for the other side.

The pro-Army petition presented on July 13 marked a renewal of activity by both sides. While quantification is impossible, the pro-Presbyterian apprentices seem to have been more active and more visible. The street demonstrations were not carried out by apprentices alone, but apprentices seem to have formed a prominent part of the crowds. Along with seamen, watermen, and officers and men of the trained bands, the

¹⁴*The Honour of London Prentices* (London, 1647).

¹⁵*Seasonable Considerations from the Gentlemen Apprentices* (London, 1647).

¹⁶*The Humble Petition of the Well-Affected Young Men and Apprentices* (London, 1647).

apprentices were listed as signers of a "Solemn Engagement," which was presented to City officials on July 19. Calling on the City to unite in supporting the king's recent peace proposals, the signers pledged themselves to support the "Solemn League and Covenant."¹⁷ Signing this engagement required boldness, since it was a direct challenge to the Army and a clear affirmation of support for the Presbyterian position.

Meanwhile, Parliament showed itself reluctant to follow the Presbyterian position. On June 26 eleven Presbyterian leaders, having been impeached by the Army, withdrew from the House of Commons. Fairfax had also informed both the House and the City that control of the London militia would have to be restored to the former committee. Thus the House was faced with a crucial test on July 22 when it received a copy of the Solemn Engagement. Opting for the Army, the House declared the signers to be traitors and appointed a committee to investigate the document and the means used to procure signatures for it. Control of the militia was also returned to the Independent committee. On July 23 the House ordered the militia to "take some speedy and effectual course for the quiet and safety of the City and the safe sitting of the Houses of Parliament."¹⁸ In anticipating trouble Parliament showed no great insight, for control of the militia was critical to the success of the Presbyterians, who could be expected to resist this change vigorously. The protest came on the following Monday, July 26, and apprentices were in the vanguard.

On the morning of July 26, which was a Monday, a large crowd of apprentices, accompanied by some Reformadoes (former Army officers) and others, demonstrated outside Parliament, calling for the repeal of the recently passed ordinance restoring control of the militia to the Independents. Inside, City officials presented a petition for repeal and argued that the change made on July 23 indicated a lack of confidence in the City. With their petition they included two petitions which had been addressed to them, one from citizens and the other from "divers young men, citizens, and apprentices." The first of these was brief and asked that the City not relinquish control of the militia. The apprentices' petition was longer and began with a repetition of their earlier charge that there were some persons who "labour to sow new seeds of division and discord amongst us." The signers, many of whom may have signed the Solemn Engagement a few days earlier, affirmed their support for the Solemn League and Covenant. They charged that "several factious persons" in

¹⁷*To the Right Honourable Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Commons of London: The Petition of the Trained Bands . . . and Apprentices* (London, 1647). *A Petition from the City of London with a Covenant* (London, 1647).

¹⁸*The Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England* (London, 1753-62), XVI, 166-167. John Rushworth, *Historical Collections of Private Passages of State, Weighty Matters in Law, Remarkable Proceedings* (London, 1721-22), VI, 629, 630, 640-642. *Journal of the House of Commons*, V, 254-256.

LONDON APPRENTICES

“a late petition presented to the Parliament, pretended to be the petition of the young men and apprentices” were not representative of the apprentices at all. Finally, they demanded that the City not yield control of the militia. After the reading of the official City petition and the supporting documents, Parliament received a petition from the apprentices. This was addressed directly to Parliament and repeated the demand for the repeal of the July 23 militia ordinance “before the rising of the Houses.” In addition the apprentices called for the repeal of the ordinances against the Solemn Engagement and the restoration of the eleven Presbyterian leaders.¹⁹

At this point the events of July 26 must have seemed like the events of many other occasions since the beginning of the civil war, but this time the apprentices were not willing to wait while Parliament deliberated. Joined by some of the Reformadoes, the apprentices forced their way into the House of Lords and threatened to remain until the lords acquiesced to their demands. Faced with this ultimatum, the handful of peers present reversed themselves on both the militia issue and the Engagement. Having defeated one house, the apprentices turned on the House of Commons in the early afternoon. The Commons tried to resist and sent for assistance from the common council and the militia. Colonel Campfield of the militia bluntly refused and said “that the carriage of the apprentices was more warrantable than the House’s.” The common council resolved to go down and try “to appease the said multitude and to free the said House from danger,” and the lord mayor issued an order for a double watch and ward to suppress the riots.²⁰ Despite these orders and resolutions, City officials showed little enthusiasm for stopping the apprentices. The young men forced their way into the House of Commons, intimidated the Speaker and the members, and forced them to reverse their votes on the militia and Solemn Engagement. Some witnesses reported that part of the crowd remained after these votes, forced the Speaker back into his chair, held him there, and required the House to approve a resolution calling on the king to come to London.²¹ Thus the apprentices had dramatically intervened in the normal political processes and forced Parliament to accept the Presbyterian program. The next step in this revolution was to wait and see whether the Army would allow their actions to stand.

¹⁹ *Journal of the House of Lords*, IX, 355-358. *The Humble Desires of the Citizens, Young Men, and Apprentices* (London, 1647).

²⁰ *The Clarke Papers*, ed. Firth, Camden Soc. Pubs. (London, 1891-1901), I, 218. *Journals of the Common Council*, Vol. 40, fol. 240^v. *Common Hall Book*, Vol. II, fol. 80^v.

²¹ Edmund Ludlow, *The Memoirs of Edmund Ludlow, Lieutenant General of the Horse . . . 1625-72*, ed. Firth (Oxford, 1894), I, 195-205. Thomas, Lord Fairfax, *Memorials of the Civil War . . . The Fairfax Correspondence*, ed. Robert Bell (London, 1849), I, 379-384. Whitelocke, *Memorials*, II, 182. William Younger, *A Brief View of the Late Troubles and Confusions in England* (London, 1660).

On July 27 a group of apprentices attended a session of the common council and formally reported what they had done. The common council, which, if it had not actually been in collusion with the apprentices, had certainly permitted their action and had taken no effective steps to prevent or halt it, offered its official thanks to the apprentices for their "courage and bravery." The apprentices then requested that the City be prepared for defense and volunteered their services in that project. The City did take some tentative steps toward defending itself against an expected attack by the Army, and at the same time it attempted to deal with the tumults which continued in the streets. Specific orders were issued directing householders to keep their apprentices inside unless they were called out to aid in the suppression of disorders. On the following Saturday the mayor ordered that all shops be closed until further notice, apparently in another effort to keep people off the streets.²²

Of course London could not effectively defend itself against an attack by Fairfax's army, and the fragile existence of the so-called "Apprentices' Parliament" (the name applied to Parliament after July 26) depended on what action the Army might take. Fairfax made his position clear on July 29, when he wrote to the lord mayor complaining that the City had not only failed to provide an adequate guard for Parliament but had given encouragement to the apprentices' attack. When Parliament read Fairfax's letter, the two Houses joined in a reply which said that while they were aware of "the undue liberty which some apprentices of the City of London . . . have taken to themselves," they were certain that the City had not been directly involved and were satisfied that the incident would not be repeated. They had learned that Fairfax was moving toward London and ordered him not to do so, for that would create new trouble with the City. Despite the warning, Fairfax led his army into London on August 6 and restored the several members who had fled on July 26. In the weeks following, Parliament conducted official investigations into the insurrection, and a number of persons, including some apprentices, were arrested. Yet again the evidence is incomplete, and it is impossible to determine exactly how the riot was planned and organized and the extent to which the apprentices were encouraged and led by the leaders of the Presbyterian faction.

Even after the occupation of London, apprentices openly expressed their loyalty to the king and sporadically rioted against the existing authorities. The most forceful demonstration of their royalism occurred in April of 1648, when the militia proved unable to control the young men, and regular army units had to be brought in to restore order. After the

²²Journals of the Common Council, Vol. 40, fols, 240^v, 241^r. Common Hall Book, Vol. II, fols. 82^v, 83^r.

LONDON APPRENTICES

execution of the king and throughout the interregnum there were occasional incidents involving apprentices, and there is some evidence linking apprentices to various royalist conspiracies; but the most significant example of youthful political activism in this period was the so-called massacre of December 5, 1659, when the apprentices in London rose to challenge the authority of the Army and to demand the restoration of the monarchy.

By early December 1659 many apprentices, along with many other Londoners, had concluded that the government ought to be restored to civilian control from the hands of the Army, which had established a Committee of Safety in October. In the first few days of December London was full of rumors of an intended apprentice uprising, and City officials took some faltering steps to prevent such rioting. On Monday, December 5, however, a crowd of apprentices went to the lord mayor, aldermen, and common council with a petition calling for either new elections to Parliament or the restoration of all those members who had been excluded from the Long Parliament. The Committee of Safety directed the mayor to issue a proclamation against petitioning, but the mayor refused "under the pretext of indisposition and fear of the people." The committee then sent a cavalry detachment, which clashed with the apprentices on their way to Guildhall. A full day of rioting followed, with the unarmed apprentices throwing stones, tiles, and rubbish at the soldiers and shouting insults at them. Several apprentices (probably five) were killed, and a number were wounded. This day of rioting, which was the first major, overt, anti-Army act in London in several years, and the brutal suppression of the right to petition had serious repercussions in London and throughout the kingdom and stirred the hopes of royalists at home and on the Continent.²³

Three days after the "massacre" a *Vindication* was published in London on behalf of the apprentices. This pamphlet justified their actions and contrasted the open methods of the young men with the attempt of the Committee of Safety to operate in secrecy and to prevent public discussion. The author recalled the past when politicians, using "sly articles, cunning insinuations, and plausible pretenses" had deceived and misled them, causing them to petition and demonstrate against the king. A few days after the publication of the *Vindication* a broadside appeared entitled *The Remonstrance of the Apprentices*. Like the *Vindication*, this document called attention to the history of apprentice involvement in the events of the revolution and expressed regret for what had happened, renouncing any pride in past action because it now seemed that the

²³Samuel Pepys, *Letters and the Second Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. R. G. Howarth (London, 1933), pp. 14-15. Thomas Rugg, *The Diurnal of Thomas Rugg, 1659-1661*, ed. William L. Sachse, Camden Third Ser., XCI (London, 1961), 9-10, 13-14.

apprentices' blood had been shed in vain. Instead of taking glory in the heroic past, the apprentices should look to the future and "in particular ourselves, both in the decay and loss of trade." The author lamented that in the past religion had been as a "Trojan horse" for the introduction of disorder and heresy; he said that the only sensible course would be to reestablish the old religion with some disciplinary changes. He pointed out that the cry of "no bishops" had been followed by that of "no trade." The broadside pointed out that the apprentices had always supported the privileges of a free Parliament and suggested that the Long Parliament was not really the best agency for restoring political stability. The third section of the *Remonstrance* focused on the economic situation, pointing out that the past eleven years had damaged the economy not only of London but of the entire kingdom. After warning of the possibility of a foreign invasion the author called for a return "to the condition and state of affairs where we begun."²⁴

The several instances described above and the attitudes expressed in the petitions and pamphlets demonstrate that the young men of London played an important role in the political life of England during the revolutionary era. The rioting and petitioning in the early forties were significant, perhaps crucial, ingredients in the early successes of the parliamentary party. Then, like many other Englishmen, the young men moved from opposition to the monarchy to support of it. The revolution of July 1647 played an important part in the Presbyterian program and the struggle between the Army and the Parliament for control of the government. The rioting in late 1659 helped to bring about the restoration of the monarchy. Though youthful political activism was not confined to apprentices in London, they were the ones who played the most crucial and most obvious role. Apprenticeship in London brought together young men from all over the country and from every social order and provided them with opportunities for developing a subculture of their own. It also afforded an unusual opportunity for organization and placed them at the scene of important events. Though these factors are important and though the psychology of adolescence affected their activism, the apprentices were also motivated by some of the same factors which motivated adults; thus a comprehension of the phenomena of street politics is useful in understanding the activities of the apprentices.

In the seventeenth century, as in any other historical period, one of the things which can bring people into the streets is concern about the state of the economy. The London apprentices had as much reason as anyone else to be concerned about the economic situation. Economic grievances were mentioned in many of their petitions, often in terms of what the future

²⁴*A Vindication of the London Apprentices' Petition and the Legality of Their Subscriptions Asserted* (London, 1659). *The Remonstrance of the Apprentices in and about London* (London, 1659).

LONDON APPRENTICES

held for them. As young men preparing for the future and making the transition from childhood to adulthood, they were worried that high prices, low wages, lagging production, and general economic instability might well nip in the bud their potential careers. At the beginning of the revolutionary era, a serious depression began and continued throughout most of the years of the civil war. Warfare interrupted normal trade and diverted human and financial resources from constructive to destructive purposes. The most serious phases of this depression coincided with some of the most serious riots in London. Later, in the spring of 1647, shortly before the climax of the the Army-Parliament conflict and the dramatic intervention by the apprentices, there was an especially bad harvest, and grain prices rose by almost fifty percent. In the early fifties, the economy recovered, and at the same time the apprentices were relatively quiet. Near the end of the fifties, there was another sharp rise in prices, and once more the apprentices took to the streets.²⁵

The correlation between economic distress and political activism is hardly surprising and confirms what might be expected—that people, both young and old, riot or take other unusual measures when they are hungry or feel themselves seriously threatened by an economic downturn. Apprentices were particularly vulnerable to economic depression; if a tradesman became destitute, his apprentices surely suffered too. If a master were forced to close his shop, his apprentices might well find themselves cast out of house and home, penniless and faced with the difficult task of finding a new master. However, to overemphasize economic distress as a cause of political activism would be to accept what E. P. Thompson, in a study of crowd behavior in eighteenth-century England, called “a spasmodic view of popular history”:

According to this view the common people can scarcely be taken as historical agents before the French Revolution. Before this period they intrude occasionally and spasmodically upon the historical canvas, in periods of sudden social disturbance. These intrusions are compulsive, rather than conscious or self-activating; they are simple responses to economic stimuli. It is sufficient to mention a bad harvest or a downturn in trade, and all requirements of historical explanation are satisfied . . . we need only bring together an index of unemployment and high food prices to be able to chart the course of social disturbance. This contains a self-evident truth (people protest when they are hungry): and in much the same way a “sexual tension chart” would show that the onset of sexual maturity can be correlated with a greater frequency of sexual activity.²⁶

²⁵Edwin F. Gay, “Economic Depressions, 1603-1660,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, V (1942), 193-198. E. H. Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins, “Seven Centuries of the Price of Consumables Compared with Builders’ Wage Rates,” *Economica*, XXIII (Nov. 1956), 298, 303, 313.

²⁶E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, No. 50 (Feb. 1971), pp. 76-77.

Just as economic distress is an inadequate explanation of street politics, the “boys will be boys” explanation is inadequate and it too contains a “self-evident truth.” Yet this seems to be the basis of David Underdown’s comment that “apprentices were of course invariably against the government on principle, and it is not surprising to find the angry young men of the capital nearly as hostile to Cromwell in 1657 as they had been to Charles I in 1642.”²⁷ This assumption that young men are always ready to riot, while an over-simplification, does have some basis in psychology. Part of Erik Erikson’s explanation of adolescence holds that it is, in part, “a psychological moratorium” between childhood and adulthood and that society allows “a selective permissiveness . . . of provocative playfulness on the part of youth.”²⁸ But this explanation alone suffers the same shortcoming Thompson ascribed to the “spasmodic school” of historical interpretation. While a society may be tolerant of adolescent boisterousness, the political activism of English youth in the seventeenth century cannot be dismissed as mere “provocative playfulness.” Surely the revolution of July 1647 was something more than a Guy Fawkes Day riot and the massacre of December 1659 more than a Shrovetide game.

While economic conditions and the characteristics and experiences of adolescence are important factors, part of the explanation for youthful political activism lies in what Thompson has characterized as legitimization, which he defined as

the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and in general that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community. On occasion this popular consensus was endorsed by some measure of license afforded by the authorities. More commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference.²⁹

This concept, used by Thompson to explain and justify the behavior of eighteenth-century adults, can be applied to the political activism of seventeenth-century youth. The early leaders of the Puritan Revolution and those who fought for Parliament in the first civil war were convinced that their cause was legitimate, that they were fighting for the true Protestant religion, for the king, and for the traditional rights and liberties of Englishmen. The politically active apprentices were motivated by the same conviction. Their participation in the anti-Strafford riots, their attacks on Roman Catholic peers, their hostility toward the bishops and

²⁷David Underdown, *Royalist Conspiracy in England, 1649-1660* (New Haven, 1960), pp. 212-213.

²⁸Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1968), p. 157.

²⁹Thompson, “English Crowd,” p. 78.

LONDON APPRENTICES

royalist officials during the early phases of the Revolution, their efforts in behalf of peace in 1642 and 1643, their intervention in the Army-Parliament dispute in 1647, their royalist uprising in 1648, and their call for a freely elected Parliament in 1659 all demonstrate that the young men were defenders of traditional and legitimate political institutions and processes—or, at least, that was their conception of what they were doing.

Concern for legitimacy was also evident in religion, where the young men rejected radicalism and remained essentially conservative, though their methods might at times have seemed radical. Their rejection of religious radicals extended to such men as Praise-God Barbon as well as to innovators such as Archbishop William Laud. While the evidence is not conclusive, it appears that during the civil wars more apprentices were attracted to the moderate Puritanism represented by the Presbyterians than to the sectarianism advocated by the Independents.

In economic matters, the apprentices were again defenders of legitimacy. In addition to complaints about the overall condition of the economy, their petitions often called for stricter enforcement of the apprenticeship laws and for expulsion of foreigners from London, since these foreigners evaded the apprenticeship requirements. The young men may not have realized that the traditional institution of apprenticeship was being weakened by the economic changes of the century and that the civil wars had accelerated the decline of traditional organizations such as the guilds. Because they were part of it, they clung to the traditional system. Hardly radicals anxious to destroy the “system” and create an entirely different one in its place, the apprentices were defenders of what they considered to be legitimate institutions.

Yet there was one new and different system which appealed to many young people, and that was the new world order envisioned by the Puritans. The adolescent mind is concerned with ideology and seeks some sort of system which will not only explain the world, but will lead to the establishment of a better world. To the extent that the apprentices did want to create a new order and were inspired by a vision of a better world, they conceived of that better world almost entirely in moral and religious terms. Youth were particularly receptive to the Puritan ideal of a New Jerusalem. Preachers recognized this and thought of youth as the best and most fitting subjects for conversion.³⁰ If the apprentices wanted a new society, it was the same sort that the moderate revolutionaries called for and the sort which appealed to many prominent citizens of London. That some prominent citizens were also inspired by this vision would have further encouraged the apprentices, since, as adolescents, they sought the

³⁰Smith, “Religion and the Conception of Youth in Seventeenth Century England,” *History of Childhood Quarterly*, II (Spring 1975), 493-516.

approval of the adults who controlled the world to which they aspired. As Thompson has pointed out, the notion of legitimacy is often "endorsed by some measure of license afforded by the authorities." Thus there was a double motivation: the appeal of the ideal and the approval of adults.

Without some degree of adult approval and even encouragement, the apprentices would have been frustrated in their efforts and perhaps less inclined to get involved in political activism. By themselves, they were powerless. Throughout the revolutionary era, it was only when their actions and aspirations coincided with some other force in the society that the apprentices had any success. In 1641 their opposition to the bishops was a response to the leadership of John Pym and other parliamentary leaders, and it would have been fruitless had it not been part of a larger movement. The invasion of Parliament in the summer of 1647 would have been impossible if City Presbyterians had not supported it at least to the extent of not opposing it. If other and older Englishmen had not tired of military rule also, the massacre and martyrdom of December 1659 would have been little more significant than the apprentices' occasional and traditional attacks on prostitutes. Whenever, either intentionally or unintentionally, the apprentices acted in conjunction with other and more powerful elements or movements, or whenever their actions coincided with widespread antipathies, youth formed an effective instrument. Otherwise their actions were the actions of a subculture powerless to change the society to which they aspired but of which they were not yet full members.

Certainly the apprentices of seventeenth-century London cannot be called modern revolutionaries, nor does generational conflict seem to have been a significant factor. The goals of youth were not only traditional and legitimate, modified only by the religious idealism of Puritanism, but throughout the revolutionary era the apprentices sought the approval of adult society. Rather than being revolutionaries, they were almost revolutionaries.