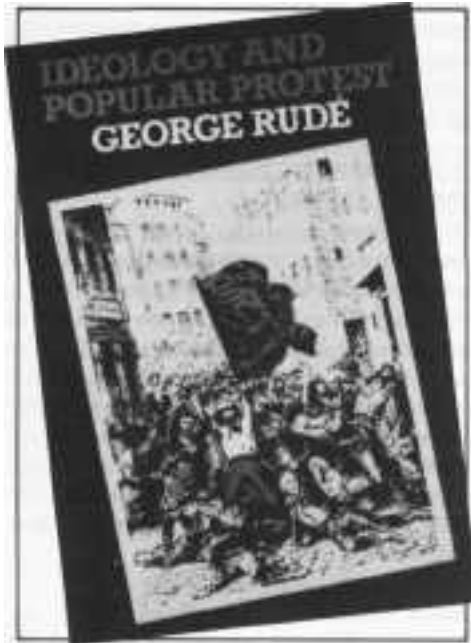


## IDEOLOGY AND POPULAR PROTEST

### G. Rude

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The declared purpose of this book is to 'explore the relationship between the preliminary "inherent" stage of popular ideology, based on the experiences and folk memory of the popular classes themselves, and the additional, "derived" element without which . . . popular action tends not to go beyond localised riots and spontaneous rebellions or labour disputes'. This thesis is succinctly presented in the pivotal second chapter on 'The Ideology of Popular Revolt'. Suggesting that a theory of ideology based on a model of two polarised and contending classes is inapplicable to pre-industrial society Professor Rude argues that popular ideology was not the 'sole property of a single class' and was therefore different from class

consciousness. Rather it was the product of the fusion of the traditional unstructured beliefs of the populace with the more sophisticated ideas derived from outside. Without this input of ideas from outside, popular movements tended to remain backward rather than forward looking, to demand the restoration of customary practices rather than the creation of new ones. The process however was a two way one and Rude cites with approval Althusser's observation that Marx could not have developed his view of the class struggle without the independent activity of the workers. Moreover sophisticated ideas, once taken up by the populace could be used in quite unexpected ways; thus the teachings of Martin Luther were transformed by the peasantry into a justification for an attack on the social hierarchy.

Obviously the theme which Rude has selected is of enormous historical and theoretical interest for Marxists. It is therefore extremely unfortunate that, after this effective and stimulating chapter, the book degenerates into a potted history of various historical episodes, so superficial that at best they only confirm the points already made and at worst are inaccurate and misleading. The central theoretical problems posed in the early part of the study almost entirely disappear in brief and loosely connected accounts of particular rebellions and revolutions. Thus, when some of these episodes (albeit not all) do appear to reflect class antagonisms and give rise to a degree of class consciousness the relationship between popular ideology and class consciousness, raised so sharply at the outset, is not given the extended and systematic analysis that it manifestly warrants. My belief is that Rude underestimates the level of class consciousness in pre-industrial protest; be that as it may, his own view lacks weight because it rests essentially on an assertion the full implications of which are not explored. Completely missed, for instance, is the opportunity to analyse the links between defence of the customary liberties of traditionally autonomous communities from the encroachments of the state on the one hand and class struggle on the other. Indeed the antagonism between central authority and provincial communities is mentioned only in passing despite its undoubted importance in the conflicts of pre-industrial society and the great significance attached to it by historians. Similarly, given the pointed criticism of those authors who have failed to do justice to 'the full range of beliefs which underlie social and political action', it is utterly baffling to find Rude subsequently dismissing as of marginal importance to his

theme the immense amount of research which has been accomplished into the nature of traditional communities and the attitudes and beliefs of the populace as revealed in their religious rites, festivities and organisations such as the *confreries*.

In any study of this sort it seems inescapable that religion must occupy a central role for it was rooted in the life and rhythms of an undeveloped agrarian economy where the cycles of the seasons, fertility rites and holy ones remained indissolubly linked; the relationship between the institutional religion of the church and the popular religion of the masses with its continuous traditions of radicalism, egalitarianism and millenarianism is surely directly relevant to Rude's theme. Yet his treatment only permits religion to appear occasionally as a sort of extraneous factor, for instance in the peasants' revolt of 1525 and the English Revolution. We are told that the ideology of the revolution was part religious and part secular 'with a considerable overlap between the two' (a phrase indicative of the unpenetrating nature of much of the argument) but the issue is barely explored. Reference is made to Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* but not to his *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* which remains the most extended explanation of how and why a particular religious ideology fused with particular social aspirations. It is also remarkable that N Cohn's valuable work *The Pursuit of the Millennium* is not even cited in the bibliography.

Part of the weakness of this book lies in its structure which is built on a series of episodes instead of an integrated analysis. This weakness is exacerbated because the episodes are chosen and presented simply to justify the argument previously set out, constituting a series of snapshots of the way in which 'inherent' and 'derived' ideas combined in particular circumstances; the theoretical and historical problems raised by the central contention are thus by-passed. But it must also be said that part of the reason for the failure to explore the issues rigorously seems to be a lack of familiarity with many of the ideas and much of the material produced by historians over the last decade or so. In particular the treatment of the medieval and early modern periods, before Rude reaches his own area of expertise in the eighteenth century, reveals signs of inadequate preparation and thought with inevitably adverse consequences for the overall impact of the book.

Apart from the gaps in the bibliography already mentioned, it is surprising to find that whilst Trevelyan's *England in the Age of*

*Wycliffe* written in 1899 is utilised for the discussion of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 there is no reference whatsoever to Hilton's *Bond Men Made Free* which offers the most recent Marxist view of the attitudes, aims and organisation of the rebels. Even worse is the treatment of the revolts of seventeenth century France for which there is now an enormous literature providing many insights into the nature of popular ideology and the endemic uprisings of the period. Rude's lack of grasp of the material is shown by his failure to appreciate that a 'gabelleur' was not an official responsible for the collection of salt taxes but a name given by the people to anyone suspected of association with the

royal fisc. Thus he manages to turn one of the biggest peasant uprisings of the century into a revolt against salt taxes when, in fact, it was taxes on wine which were at issue. This is not simply a question of academic detail for Rude is evidently unaware of the significance of the concept of the 'gabelleur' in popular consciousness although it is thoroughly discussed as part of an extended analysis of popular *mentalites* by Y M Berce in his two volume *Histoire Des Croquants*, yet another major study, dealing directly with Rude's theme, which fails to find a place in either his thinking or his bibliography.

All in all, this study fails to live up to its promise. Those who wish to explore the

undoubtedly crucial questions which it poses will do better, having digested the first two chapters, by turning to the many rich and stimulating works that already exist—Hilton on the peasantry, Hill on the English Revolutionaries, E P Thompson on the working class and, indeed, Rude himself on the crowd in the French Revolution. In addition there are dozens of useful contributions by liberal historians. Regrettably the task of bringing together the existing material in a satisfying Marxist synthesis remains incomplete, for Rude's attempt displays neither the theoretical rigour nor the mastery of the subject which such a project requires.

David Parker