

The Politics of *Gulliver's Travels*

In his first three travels Gulliver never encounters primitive peoples. The only people he communicates with or spends time with are all members of highly developed societies. They are all political societies.

From the beginning Gulliver's presence in Lilliput presents political problems and he becomes the focus of political intrigue: 'It seems that upon the first Moment I was discovered sleeping on the Ground after my Landing, the Emperor had early Notice of it by an Express: and determined in Council that I should be tyed in the Manner I have related ... ' (I.1;10). The immediate notification of Gulliver's arrival to the King, the summoning of a council, stress the fact that Lilliput is from our first encounter with it to be envisaged as a political world. The political events and political practices of Lilliput have been related to the political history of England during 1708–1715 by Firth, Case and others. But the power of the book is not just restricted to these particular political allusions: the general satire of the methods of promotion to ministerial office in Lilliput is parodic of the attitude of mind behind and nature of such procedures in any political society.

When a great Office is vacant, either by Death or Disgrace, (which often happens) five or six of those Candidates petition the Emperor to entertain his Majesty and the Court with a Dance on the Rope; and whoever jumps the highest without falling, succeeds in the Office. (I.3;22)

The absurdity and valuelessness of these methods, their total irrelevance to the requirements of public life and their inherent ridiculousness, are not restricted to any specific historical time or place.

Yet allied with such absurd comedy in the manner of appointment is the evil that the appointed can go on to practise – something again

not limited to the practices of early eighteenth-century England. When Gulliver falls from favour for refusing to gratify the King's desire for absolute domination over Blefuscu by the capture of their fleet, the Council hold long discussions about whether to poison, starve or merely blind him. The cruelty of Lilliputians in power is something that is as strongly established as the absurdity of their methods of gaining power. The moral point is stressed by these discrepancies in mode: the absurd office-getting like absurd electioneering or party conferences is the material of comedy; but comic abilities do not suit their possessors for the realities of political life, and the decisions they come up with and the behaviour they manifest takes us into the realms of the hideously brutal maintenance of power, the real iron heel of the society. The way the Lilliputians warp between being a comic flea-circus and a chamber of horrors is a mark of the duplicity, the dubiousness, the duality of their nature, which is a political nature.

And for all the general quality of his satire, its endurance, its continual relevance to human behaviour, Jonathan Swift was certainly not hiding behind a non-engaged, non-specific mode. He explicitly refers to the detail of English life, the immediate history of the English Revolution whose turbulent forces are still present for Swift. The same qualities of absurd methods of appointment to office allied with a great appetite for extending power and exercising it with cruelty are shown in the account of English public life that Gulliver gives to the King of Brobdingnag. The King

was perfectly astonished with the historical Account I gave him of our Affairs during the last Century; protesting it was only an heap of Conspiracies, Rebellions, Murders, Massacres, Revolutions, Banishments; the very worst Effects that Avarice, Faction, Hypocrisy, Perfidiousness, Cruelty, Rage, Madness, Hatred, Envy, Lust, Malice, and Ambition could produce.
(II.6; 116)

And he tells Gulliver that

You have clearly proved that Ignorance, Idleness and Vice are the proper Ingredients for qualifying a Legislator. That Laws are best explained, interpreted, and applied by those whose Interest

and Abilities lie in perverting, confounding, and eluding them ... It doth not appear from all you have said, how any one Perfection is required towards the Procurement of any one Station among you; much less that Men are ennobled on Account of their Virtue, that Priests are advanced for their Piety or Learning, Soldiers for their Conduct or Valour, Judges for their Integrity, Senators for the Love of their Country, or Counsellors for their Wisdom.
(II.6;116)

Swift's concern here is mainly with the corruption of the officers and offices of public life. He has established this in Gulliver's statements, and in the dramatised behaviour of the public figures of Lilliput. But although this is a comment on political activity, it is not really a political statement. Given the absurdities and corruptions, accepting all that, we can move on to a number of differing political conclusions. We can conclude that political action is hopeless, because power corrupts, because men in power are absurd and evil; we can conclude that we need moral, upright men in political positions; we can conclude that a correct belief will prosper whatever the corruptions of the political operatives; or we can conclude that there is no absolute truth, and that the people who profess the knowledge of an absolute truth in a political programme are merely subscribing to an ideology that serves as a cloak for personal ambitions, that represents their own economic and social aspirations.

The conclusion we come to will depend on what weight and interpretation Swift puts on political parties, on ideologies. His attitude towards them is given clearly in his account of the role of political ideologies and political parties in both the domestic and foreign affairs of Lilliput. Internally Lilliput is divided between 'two struggling Parties ... under the Names of Tramecksan, and Slamecksan, from the high and low Heels on their Shoes, by which they distinguish themselves' (I.4;32). The implication – or proclamation, rather, for Swift is not being over delicately subtle – is that this differing height of their heels is all that distinguishes them. At the same time as there are these internal divisions, Lilliput is at war with Blefuscu over the issue of which end to break eggs – the traditional way of breaking them at the larger end was proscribed in Lilliput after the present king's grandfather cut his finger when breaking the big end as a child. As a result of the Lilliputians'

resentment of the order to break only the smaller end of their eggs

there have been six Rebellions raised on that Account; wherein one Emperor lost his Life, and another his Crown. These civil Commotions were constantly fomented by the Monarchs of *Blefuscu*; and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire. It is computed, that eleven Thousand Persons have, at several Times, suffered Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller End. (I.4; 33)

What Swift is saying here is that the political ideologies motivating political action are as absurd as he has already shown the officers and offices of political life to be. Certainly this is satire, and caricature and absurdity are methods of satire; certainly the low and high heels, the big and little endians, represent specific political issues in England. But Swift is not merely using the manner of satire, adopting the appropriate decorum and so denoting serious matters by burlesque terms and concepts. He is questioning that any of the issues he deals with are serious, by comparing them to issues of the height of heels, or the end on which to break an egg. The huge disproportion between the triviality of those issues and their consequences in terms of political actions – involving death, rebellion, exile – express a huge contempt for the political. For Swift political confrontations are reducible to such absurdities: indeed, he would not think there was any reduction involved. This is the stature of political causes. Issues of class, of economic power, of parliamentary representation, of constitutional rights, of governmental responsibility have no place in this confrontation ‘during which Time we have lost Forty Capital Ships, and a much greater Number of smaller Vessels, together with thirty thousand of our best Seamen and Soldiers; and the Damage received by the Enemy is reckoned to be somewhat greater than ours’ (I.4; 34). Swift presents it merely as the clash of two absurd, intransigent sides each trying to foist their absurd doctrines on to everyone else, each attempting the total domination of society. The particular causes, the particular beliefs, are not presented as having any serious foundations.

When absurd beliefs are allied with corrupt political practitioners and ridiculous methods of appointing and selecting statesmen, the total account is one of unmitigated hostility towards the political

world, towards political commitment, towards the assumption that there is any value in any political position. The reported views of the King of Brobdingnag offer a contemptuous dismissal of the political realm, and a strong advocacy of an alternative. The king

gave it for his Opinion; that whoever could make two Ears of Corn, or two Blades of Grass to grow upon a Spot of Ground where only one grew before; would deserve better of Mankind, and do more essential Service to his Country, than the whole Race of Politicians put together. (II.7; 119–20)

But his statement does not go on to recommend the abolition of all political structures, and a vision of decentralized, corn-growing communities. Kings, cabinets, legislation are accepted as facts. The judgements are all against the delusions and corruptions of the politicians and leaders; and against, too, the 'rabble'. The king's rejection is of the immorality of the practitioners and the triviality of the issues – it is not a rejection of the political structure of the society. That political structure is never questioned.

It is Swift's assumption that such an economic, agricultural change could be achieved apolitically – and have no political consequences. So entrenched is his conservatism that conservatism for him is *the way things by nature are* (or should be) and agricultural change can simply be fitted into this system without changing the system. But his conservatism is not as static as it purports to be. It is also a response to a fear, a threat. Politicians are ambitious and corrupt but at least they generally come from the 'natural leaders'; but the way things are can be disrupted by the activities of the people – in particular by the activist element of the people, which Swift chooses to call the 'rabble'. The 'rabble' are the 'common people', the workers that a member of the gentry meets with consequences discomfiting for the member of the gentry. Swift presents them as mindless, violent, hostile, disruptive – and hence potentially riotous and hence rebellious. When Gulliver is in the temple in Lilliput he was

left with a strong Guard, to prevent the Impertinence, and probably the Malice of the Rabble, who were very impatient to croud about me as near as they durst; and some of them had the

Impudence to shoot their Arrows at me as I sate on the Ground by the Door of my House. (I.2; 15)

Swift's fear, shared with all his class and revealed clearly in this paranoid fantasy, is that one day he'll go out in the street and the rabble will be crushing him in a mob charge, or firing at him from the roofs and from round corners; the class war will have begun in earnest, and will not be merely a matter of impoliteness, surliness and such like. The fear is there, but it is depoliticized by turning the hostile class into a rude rabble – presenting their behaviour as social impoliteness, spots on the perfect fabric of immutable design – rather than seeing them as wanting a different design. The fear can be repressed. It is a problem of rudeness, crudeness, rather than of political control. And when the rudeness gets out of hand, its political basis is denied so totally that even the question about whether the rabble might have a political basis cannot be asked. The rabble is a mindless mob, it has to be. Its ideas are not deemed worthy of notice. Swift never has Gulliver talk politics to any of the rabble. In every voyage Gulliver talks to the king or the authority figure, and discusses with the rulers how society is run. It is never looked at from the point of view of the ruled. Having presented the delusions and corruptions of the leaders, the ambitious politicians, Swift finds nothing better in the led. His conservatism denies that conservatism is an ideology, and rejects all other ideologies as examples of absurdity and triviality in belief and behaviour. There cannot be any serious political theory – other than the conservatism which isn't considered a theory but an account of the way things naturally are (or should be).

This is the picture Swift paints of the political life. From here he can develop various further positions. One would be an attitude of utter rejection, and Swift has often enough been thought of – notably in Leavis's influential essay – as utterly negative, as rejecting the world, life, humanity. Negative rejection is the state Swift puts Gulliver in with regard to mankind at the end of Book IV. But although withdrawal and rejection are certainly possibilities considered in *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift also considers certain positive political attitudes.

Having made a diagnosis so fearful, the repressive imposition of order merely for the sake of order can seem appealing in the face of the impending chaos. It is not, however, something Swift advocates.

It is not true to say, as George Orwell wrote, that Swift's 'political aims were on the whole reactionary ones' (IV.57;257). Reactionary power, absolute authority, comes off badly in *Gulliver's Travels*. The king of Lilliput, when Gulliver has prevented an invasion from Blefuscu by capturing their fleet, develops absolutist ambitions. He

desired I would make some other Opportunity of bringing all the rest of his Enemy's Ships into his Ports. And so unmeasurable is the Ambition of Princes, that he seemed to think of nothing less than reducing the whole Empire of *Blefuscus* into a Province, and governing it by a Viceroy; of destroying the *Big-Indian* Exiles, and compelling that People to break the smaller End of their Eggs; by which he would remain sole Monarch of the whole World. But I endeavoured to divert him from his Design, by many Arguments drawn from the Topicks of Policy as well as Justice; And I plainly protested, that I would never be an Instrument of bringing a free and brave People into Slavery: And when the Matter was debated in Council, the wisest Part of the Ministry were of my Opinion.

This open bold Declaration of mine was so opposite to the Schemes and Politicks of his Imperial Majesty, that he could never forgive me ... (I.5;37)

In Brobdingnag, of course, the situation is reversed. Here Gulliver advocates to the horror of the king the marvels of gunpowder 'that would have made him absolute Master of the Lives, the Liberties, and the Fortunes of his People' (II.7;119).

For all his presenting political issues and political ambitions as petty, trivial and comic, in his opposition to absolutism Swift is utterly serious. His turning away from the political arena in mocking despair is not his final attitude. His conservatism is opposed to absolutism as well as to any democracy or egalitarianism. Swift's opposition to absolutism depends on his acceptance of the theory of the mixed monarchy – the theory that the three estates of the realm – kings, nobles and commons – were of equal importance and of equal natural foundation in the state. Z. S. Fink has shown how this is expressed in the course of the political discussions with the king of Brobdingnag. At the end of the discussions, Gulliver explains the existence of a militia of citizens (also called the King's army) – a sort of permanent reserve army

made up of tradesmen in the several cities, and farmers in the country, whose commanders are only the nobility and gentry, without pay or reward ...

I was curious to know how this Prince, to whose Dominions there is no Access from any other Country, came to think of Armies, or to teach his People the Practice of military Discipline. But I was soon informed, both by Conversation, and Reading their Histories. For, in the Course of many Ages they have been troubled with the same Disease, to which the whole Race of Mankind is subject; the Nobility often contending for Power, the People for Liberty, and the King for absolute Dominion. All which, however happily tempered by the Laws of the Kingdom, have been sometimes violated by each of the three Parties; and have more than once occasioned Civil Wars, the last whereof was happily put an end to by this Prince's Grandfather in a general Composition; and the Militia then settled with Common Consent hath been ever since kept in the strictest Duty. (II.7; 121-2)

Here Swift has abandoned his presentation of all political interest as being absurd, corrupt or criminal. Here he presents the three estates as having their three, independent class interests. Certainly he refers to this as a 'disease' – with perhaps the implication that it is something nasty that has been caught and that might be cured and that certainly should be tried to be cured. But nonetheless, this is an analysis of political interest, of competing interests, this is a recognition closer to realities than anything we have been offered up till this point. This gives politics a far more serious role than the superficial cavortings of the Lilliputians, or than Gulliver's account of the English to the king of Brobdingnag, would ever allow.

However, it is still not clear that Swift recognised his analysis of the three orders as political. He presents it not as a political theory, but rather as a fact about human nature – a matter of psychology or original sin; not something that much can really be done about. That Brobdingnag had experienced civil wars might have allowed for some political speculation. A radical thinker might, for instance, have argued that as long as a state has a hierarchical system with a monarchy and nobility there will always be civil wars. *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (1649) of Gerard Winstanley and others declares

In the beginning of time, the great Creator, Reason, made the earth to be a common treasury, to preserve beasts, birds, fishes, and man, the lord that was to govern this creation. For man had domination given to him over the beasts, birds and fishes. But not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another. (77)

But Swift has closed his ears to any communism or democratic republicanism. To him political theories are the absurdities of high and low heel and big and little end factionists, but the three social orders are innate. He never acknowledges that this vision of the three orders is but another hypothesis, another ideology. Although he offers a serious political analysis, he presents it not as a political theory; to do that would be to allow other people to present other political theories, and then the simple conservative unity would be demonstrably shattered. The validity of the conservative theory lies solely in its excluding all other theories as mere theories, and presenting itself as 'the way things are', and the 'natural order'. Swift presents his analysis not as a political theory but as a fact of human nature.

We might wonder why it is that Lilliput, Brobdingnag and Laputa all have social structures of the three orders. The expectations of satire might provide a partial explanation: we have to be offered societies whose structures are like those of the England that is being satirised. But the real explanation, I think, is that Swift believed that the three orders were innate to man. He finds it necessary to have Gulliver explain why there should be armies and war in Brobdingnag, when 'there is no Access from any other Country', but never sees it as problematic that in these isolated communities, societies of the three orders of king, nobles and people should always have developed.

The most radical critique of domestic political life offered in *Gulliver's Travels* is that voiced by the king of Brobdingnag. But the questions the king asks of Gulliver and the statements Gulliver gives make a moral critique of English political practice.

He asked, what Methods were used to cultivate the Minds and Bodies of our young Nobility; and in what kind of Business they commonly spent the first and teachable Part of their Lives. What

Course was taken to supply that Assembly, when any noble Family became extinct.

What Qualifications were necessary in those who are to be created new Lords: Whether the Humour of the Prince, a Sum of Money to a Court-Lady, or a Prime Minister; or a Design of strengthening a Party opposite to the publick Interest, ever happened to be Motives in those Advancements. What Share of the Knowledge these Lords had in the Laws of their Country, and how they came by it, so as to enable them to decide the Properties of their Fellow-Subjects in the last Resort. whether they were always so free from Avarice, Partialities, or Want, that a Bribe, or some other sinister View, could have no Place among them. (II.6;113)

This is not a political critique of English political theory. The sorts of questions asked about educating the nobility and creating a new nobility, and the ensuing questions about the commons and bribing voters, accept as an implicit ideal the model of English political structures. There is no questioning at all about the principles of 'natural leaders', of a hereditarian nobility with its political representation in the House of Lords: the only questions are about moral education and about the principles of creating new lords – unquestioningly accepting an aristocracy as a permanent social and political force. The king of Brobdingnag's political theory and the social organization of his state are an expression of the theory of the mixed monarchy; but it is not recognised as a theory that can be questioned or challenged. The questions and challenge relate to ethical behaviour within that system.

The most memorable treatment of the conflict of interests of the three estates or classes is that given in the account of the relationship of the flying island to the lands below it in Book III. In recognizing the competing interests, Swift offers here an advocacy of a politics of compromise.

The King would be the most absolute Prince in the Universe, if he could but prevail on a Ministry to join with him; but these having their Estates below on the Continent, and considering that the Office of a Favourite hath a very uncertain Tenure, would never consent to the enslaving their Country.

If any Town should engage in Rebellion or Mutiny, fall into violent Factions, or refuse to pay the usual Tribute; the King hath two Methods of reducing them to Obedience. The first and the mildest Course is by keeping the Island hovering over such a Town ... But if they still continue obstinate, or offer to raise Insurrections; he proceeds to the last Remedy, by letting the Island drop directly upon their Heads, which makes a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men. However, this is an Extremity to which the Prince is seldom driven, neither indeed is he willing to put it in Execution; nor dare his Ministers advise him to an Action, which as it would render them odious to the People, so it would be a great Damage to their own Estates that lie all below; for the Island is the King's Demesn.

But there is still indeed a more weighty Reason ... the King, when he is highest provoked, and most determined to press a City to Rubbish, orders the Island to descend with great Gentleness, out of a Pretence of Tenderness to his People, but indeed for fear of breaking the Adamantine Bottom; in which case it is the Opinion of all their Philosophers, that the Loadstone could no longer hold it up, and the whole Mass would fall to the Ground. (III.3; 155–6)

There is, then, a limit on the exercise of power here. For if the king attempts to exercise absolute power by bringing down the full weight of the island to crush the people below he will damage the very instrument of his power. Similarly, the people are inhibited from too great an exercise of independence or rebelliousness for fear of the possibility of such an action. Neither side can win. It is a very neat fable for compromise.

It might be objected that the fable is of limited applicability, that the damage to the bottom of the island is something limiting the exercise of absolute power only in this rather exceptional community. But the fable is not dependent only on the mysterious qualities of the flying island. The ministers would never agree on such a policy since 'it would be a great Damage to their own Estates that lie all below'. Their wealth and power depend on the continued existence of the people to farm the estates. There can be no common cause between king and nobility, for the king's lands are all on the island; and if the nobility did agree to the destruction of their own estates beneath, they

would be dependent on the king's goodwill for their continuing economic support and 'the Office of a Favourite hath a very uncertain Tenure'. Any such alliance could only be temporary.

This separation of the nature of the king's estates and the aristocrats' estates is an interesting mystification. Swift clearly needs conceptually to separate monarchical power from aristocratic power. For his class structure he needs to present it as different in kind. He recognizes the economic base of aristocratic power – their landownings, farmed by the people, and producing rents from the people and consuming the peoples' surplus. But he needs to mystify the monarchy by obscuring that shared economic base. The king's economic base has to be placed somewhere – and Swift recognizes that it, too, comes from landholding; but to make a separation from the aristocrats, Swift places the monarchical landholdings in the sky. The material base of kingship is made aerial and hence somehow divine, magical, mystic – not real, exploitative land-holding but a flying island. Monarchical authority isn't soiled by being based on real, earthy landholding, like aristocratic power.

The three interests of king, nobility and people that are stated in Book II, are in Laputa realised in fictional form. The concepts are dramatised in the imagery and events of the novel. And by the introduction of these concepts, we can see Book III as offering, for all its mystifications, an advance in political sophistication and analysis on Book I. With the recognition of inevitable conflicting interests, Swift both takes political behaviour more seriously than in Lilliput, and can offer some positive suggestions of compromise. We have been led, through a series of examples and discussions, to a deeper understanding. Swift has expressed a political philosophy of deterrents. He has taken us into the post-nuclear weapons world of mutually assured destruction that will benefit no one – so the ultimate threat can only be brandished around in a game of bluff. To use the flying island to crush a rebellion will at the same time as crushing the rebellion destroy the instrument of power, so no one will win. If the authority of king and aristocrats is asserted in this ultimate way, there will be no people to do all the work for them; the people will have been exterminated in a massive act of genocide; the king and aristocrats will have to start digging the soil with their own hands so as not to starve. It is an unthinkable possibility.

Yet looked at in another way Swift's attitudes in Book III offer

little advance from Book I, and indeed are dependent on the judgements expressed in Books I and II on political activity. When political behaviour and activity have been summed up as absurd, comic, cruel, irrational and based on no theories or ideas, it is easy to advocate a compromise of the factions that confront each other. A scepticism about the value of every political position, a suspicion about every scheme that claims to offer a solution make the advocacy of compromise easy: there is no problem about surrendering a position for a compromise when no position is serious or worthwhile. This habit of mind makes it possible to accept the concept of a compromise between the three classes – even though Swift would, at the same time, deny that those three class positions were in any way political or to be identified with so called political and party confrontations. There is an Orwellian doublethink in operation here.

And so the political positions of the three classes of the state are not presented as deriving from theory or argument; they are given as inevitable, instinctual roles, not subject to thought or debate, not 'political'. If three groups are born as having different interests then there is an inevitability about competition and confrontation, and a need for compromise, and an impossibility that any one of them can be absolutely correct. Since this conflict is innate in society, no 'political' position, no party, can ever hope to gain total support, since it will always be cut across by these prior divisions of class interests. The competing interests of the three classes are presented as inevitable, as pre-existing and transcending any other issues. They embody all that can be said about class, authority, economics and property in an inflexible, nondynamic way. The only political stance possible is to discourage factions, new beliefs, alternatives, further complications, and to try to reduce conflict down to the minimum – i.e., the three class interests – and then to try to reconcile the three positions into compromise. And it is compromise, not a tripartite pluralism, that is advocated. And it is to a compromise directed toward balance, stasis. There is no suggestion that a dynamic should emerge from the conflict. It is the very fear that such a dynamic might be generated that causes Swift's advocacy of compromise, his commitment to stasis. Who knows what might emerge if a dynamic was allowed to generate and things started changing? Yet his very theory of the mixed monarchy has built into it the idea of conflicting interests; he may wish them to be resolved into an internal harmony,

he may conceptually depoliticize these class interests and identify politics only with faction, but, as Irvin Ehrenpreis has pointed out, nonetheless 'he was admitting that the new age involved essentially conflicting interests within society, a fact inconsistent with his dislike of factions':

Two massive expressions of social purpose were available to him – the first, 'an internal harmony among the parts of society'; the second, 'an equilibrium of conflicting interests'. Of these he preferred the old to the new. Refusing to adapt himself to the clash of dissenter against Anglican, financier against proprietor, or Whig against Tory, as more than a passing malady, Swift remained negatively oriented to the social forces of his time. (145)

His fear of the outbreak of radical anarchism and communism such as had been expressed and practiced in the 1640s and 1650s is apparent in his refusal to mention that such things ever were expressed or practised; all that was rabble noise, enthusiasm, fanaticism arising from sexual repression, arguments about the height of heels and the end on which to break an egg. He knew it was there; he denied it had any significant content.

Given the nature of *Gulliver's Travels* as travel book, imaginary voyage, multiple utopian speculation, a reader might well expect to meet in it at least one episode involving primitive people, noble savages, or unfallen creatures. And after the political societies of the first three books, the houyhnhnms do at first appear to be unfallen, uncorrupt, rational, possibly ideal beings. They present themselves to Gulliver as having a society that does not need the corruptions of political life. 'Power, Government, War, Law, Punishment, and a Thousand other Things had no Terms, wherein that Language could express them; which made the Difficulty almost insuperable to give my Master any Conception of what I meant ...' (IV.4;228). And after Gulliver has given his account of European society, his 'master' comments

That, our Institutions of *Government* and *Law* were plainly owing to our gross Defects in *Reason*, and by consequence, in *Virtue*; because *Reason* alone is sufficient to govern a *Rational* Creature. (IV.7;243)

After the succession of political activities that the preceding books have presented, we are in as ready a state as Gulliver is to welcome a society that can operate without politics, with neither parties nor institutions nor competing social orders. But the realities of the houyhnhnm society do not accord with the official account. The houyhnhnms have no words for 'Power, Government' and so on which makes it difficult for Gulliver to talk to his 'Master'; but they clearly have the concepts of authority and rule, for one of them is in the role of 'Master' to Gulliver, and reason 'governs' rational creatures in their view. The contradiction, firmly established by Swift, is left implicit. It is not a contradiction that Gulliver is willing to recognize. Gulliver is mystified by the seemingly different surface of the society. No king, no upper house, it must be different. But for all the lack of political vocabulary, the society most definitely has its social structures and political institutions. There are masters and servants amongst the houyhnhnms: white, sorrel and iron-gray horses fulfil different social roles within a hierarchy. The quarternial 'Representative Council of the whole Nation' (IV.8;254) is, indeed, no other than a parliament, and Gulliver's 'Master' who attends it 'as the Representative of our District' (IV.9;255) is no other than a member of parliament. Even if they don't have a king or upper house, the houyhnhnms are still political; getting rid of kings and aristocrats, Swift is assuring us, won't save you from politics; so why not keep the kings and natural rulers? Without them the advantages of harmonious equilibrium are lost and an absolutism or totalitarianism is bound to emerge from the removal of these qualifying forces.

Though the houyhnhnm society may seem superior to European society in its lack of political corruptions, absurdities of party and ideology, and competing interest groups, it achieves this apparent superiority only by a certain deliberate mystification, a pretence that its politics aren't political; and at the expense of certain freedoms. In the course of the preceding books Swift's belief in the mixed monarchy has become clearer. It is a doctrine of compromise, of course, and because of that the apparent clarity and singleness of the houyhnhnms' rationality might seem appealing; but the virtues of political compromise, of the adjustable balances, have emerged in contrast with ambitions of the various parties and social orders to have their own beliefs and interests adopted with a singleness of purpose that represses all alternatives. Just such an absolutism

has been achieved in houghnhnm society. Orwell indicated the totalitarian nature of this society but without recognizing that Swift had established in the preceding books the means for a critique and rejection of it. Orwell argued that Swift endorses the society of the houghnhnms and presents them as a positive utopia. But mistaken as his interpretation of Swift's position is, he gives an incisive account of the repressive nature of the houghnhnm society that cannot be bettered.

In a society in which there is no law, and in theory no compulsion, the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion. But public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law. When human beings are governed by 'thou shalt not', the individual can practice a certain amount of eccentricity: when they are supposedly governed by 'love' or 'reason', he is under continuous pressure to make him behave and think in exactly the same way as everyone else. The Houghnhnms, we are told, were unanimous on almost all subjects. The only question they ever *discussed* was how to deal with the Yahoos. Otherwise there was no room for disagreement among them, because the truth is always either self-evident, or else it is undiscoverable and unimportant. They had apparently no word for 'opinion' in their language, and in their conversations there was no 'difference of sentiments.' They had reached, in fact, the highest stage of totalitarian organization, the stage when a conformity has become so general that there is no need for a police force. (IV.57;252)

The closed nature of the society, the unawareness of other possibilities is given a fine underlining just before Gulliver leaves. Standing on a height he sees what appears to be a small island, and confirms this by looking through his spyglass. 'But it appeared to the Sorrel Nag to be only a blue Cloud: For, as he had no Conception of any Country beside his own, so he could not be as expert in distinguishing remote Objects at Sea, as we who so much converse in that Element' (IV.10;265). This is not only a reminder of the houghnhnms' lack of vocabulary and lack of concepts: it relates too to their overall political philosophy, the sorrel nag's having 'no conception of any Country besides his own'. The political insights of

Gulliver's Travels come largely from Swift's having such various conceptions of other countries, of being able to illuminate the political nature of his own society by comparison with other countries and the conceptions of hypothetical countries, of utopias and anti-utopias. But the houyhnhnm sees not another country, not another island, but a blue cloud, rather than face up to the proper explanation which would upset his world picture – which would allow other possibilities, other worlds, potential differences of interpretation, opinion.

Orwell indicated the non-institutional aspects of the political form of houyhnhnm society. But there are political institutions too. The parliamentary nature of the quaternial general assembly is made clear in the topics discussed; in addition to redistributing foodstuffs, they had 'their old Debate, and indeed, the only Debate that ever happened in their country – Whether the *Yahoos* should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth' (IV.9;255). And with the abruptness of the introduction of the issue, and the extremeness of its formulation, it is inescapably stressed that like all other societies encountered, that of the houyhnhnms is equally political.

The nature of the proposed extermination cannot be defined until the nature of the yahoos is defined. Our judgement of the event will be different depending upon whether we see the yahoos as domestic animals, or as subservient human beings. The ambiguity about the yahoos is of course basic to the satiric effects Swift achieves. That they seem indeterminately men and beasts is in itself a comment on human motivations and activities: their sexuality and their hoarding of 'certain shining Stones' (IV.7;244) are particularly presented in this way to illuminate the 'bestial' or irrational aspects of European society looked at from Swift's upper-class 'natural leader' Christianity.

But to understand the political issues we need to explore the ambiguities. Is Swift offering us here a comparable reversal to that of the first two books with its big and little men? Horses and men in reversed roles, so that the Yahoos are in this context animals. Or are the Yahoos essentially human beings who are treated as animals?

One of the suggestions in the debate about exterminating the yahoos, is that 'the *Houyhnhnms* should be *exhorted* to cultivate the Breed of Asses, which, as they are in all respects more valuable Brutes; so they have this Advantage, to be fit for Service at five

Years old, which the others are not till Twelve' (IV.9;257). That there are asses to carry out the functions of beasts of burden indicates that the yahoos are not to be seen simply as the equivalent of horses in Europe for this houyhnhnm society. By removing them from their beast of burden role, the society would not necessarily be disrupted; there are asses to fill their niche. The possibility is that the yahoos are not in any necessary or appropriate role in the houyhnhnm society. That they are treated as humans treat animals may tell us more about the people who treat them that way, than about their true nature.

Swift creates for *A Modest Proposal* (1729) a writer who is able to suggest using the Irish children as animals for food and skins; he talks about human population in terms of farming – 'a Child, *just dropt from its Dam*', 'Two hundred Thousand Couple whose Wives are Breeders'. By thinking of humans as animals, they can be treated as animals. The houyhnhnms think of the yahoos as animals, propose exterminating them as animals, skin them for Gulliver's canoe.

But what if the yahoos are not animals? Their similarity to Gulliver is stressed. Commentators tend to indicate how this emphasises the bestiality and depravity of mankind, taking their cue from Gulliver's reactions; but the comparison works from the opposite direction. The houyhnhnms are concerned to keep the yahoos bestial, as animals; but if indeed the yahoos are like Gulliver, then the possibility of educating them, of civilizing them exists. Now such an education is an ambivalent issue: on the one hand it might be argued there is no point in educating the yahoos for they would simply be brought to the state of fallen man and man is debased and fallen. That is the conservative pessimistic view – the easiest because it involves doing nothing, just carry on as things are, don't build schools, keep on exploiting the yahoos. To educate the yahoos would simply be to give them a European sophistication in their beastliness. But behind this cynical, conservative rejection of the idea of educating them, is the fear that if the yahoos were educated they would begin to alter the way society is. We can't afford to educate the people, they'd never put up with the system if they knew enough to know how to alter it.

Now the possibility that the yahoos are educable is built into the book – but resisted as a political conclusion; who would do all the dirty work if that happened? It is a possibility Swift builds into his narrative – and then realizing with horror that it is possible, he

restores the stress on the beastliness of the yahoos.

Yet, debased as European man is presented to be, he is certainly less debased, less bestial than the yahoos. The importance of the kindness of Don Pedro, the Portuguese captain who rescues Gulliver from the open sea after he has been forced to leave the land of the houyhnhnms, is that it contrasts both with the cold rationality of the houyhnhnms and with the bestiality of the yahoos – one of whom in Gulliver's eyes Don Pedro appears to be: 'I wondered to find such Civilities from a Yahoo' (IV.11;270).

Perhaps the yahoos could achieve such civilities. This would certainly seem likely if the traditional account of their origin is correct. The story is that

the two *Yahoos* said to be first seen among them, had been driven thither over the Sea; that coming to Land, and being forsaken by their Companions, they retired to the Mountains, and degenerating by Degrees, became in Process of Time, much more savage than those of their own Species in the Country from whence these two Originals came. (IV.9;256)

The fact that Gulliver who also arrives by sea does not degenerate but abhors the behaviour of the yahoos is an argument for the possibility for the rehabilitation of the yahoos. Man has a potential for degeneration as the yahoos show; but this degeneration is insisted on, and desired as an irremediable, permanent state for the yahoos, by the houyhnhnms. It would not suit the houyhnhnms if the yahoos were civilised and educated.

And once we realise that the houyhnhnms economically need the suppressed beast class of the yahoos, then we realise that the yahoos could very easily become educated, but it is against everyone's interests from the group in control that such an education or a civilization should occur. The 'rabble' is a creation of the upper classes; they have to keep the rabble illiterate and frustrated and violent, because if it were educated, it would refuse to accept the social structure the upper classes have created. Yahoo-like behaviour is a direct and inevitable consequence of keeping a class in economic and social subjection. Gulliver has to be expelled because he presents a threat to the security of the houyhnhnms' society. And it is essentially a political threat. Because he has not degenerated into

brutish illiteracy, mindless bestiality, he is a yahoo who can think, who can still reason; he has to be got rid of before he sees what is really going on and then starts a slave revolt amongst the yahoos. Gulliver is told by his 'Master'

That in the last general Assembly, when the Affair of the *Yahoos* was entered upon, the Representatives had taken Offence at his keeping a *Yahoo* (meaning myself) in his Family more like a *Houyhnhnm* than a Brute Animal. That, he was known frequently to converse with me, as if he could receive some Advantage or Pleasure in my Company: That, such a Practice was not agreeable to Reason or Nature, or a thing ever heard of before among them. The Assembly did therefore *exhort* him, either to employ me like the rest of my Species, or command me to swim back to the Place from whence I came. That, the first of these Expedients was utterly rejected by all the *Houyhnhnms*, who had ever seen me at his House or their own: For, they alledged, That because I had some Rudiments of Reason, added to the natural Pravity of those Animals, it was to be feared, I might be able to seduce them in Troops by Night to destroy the *Houyhnhnms* Cattle, as being naturally of the ravenous Kind, and Averse from Labour. (IV.10;263)

The houyhnhnms, then, are very worried about the break-down in segregation resulting from the way Gulliver is treated by his 'master', and they fear a slave revolt; they fear that Gulliver will lead an insurrection that will threaten their property and withdraw their slave labour. Gulliver has to be expelled for fear he will subvert the whole order of houyhnhnm society. The rationality, order, social stability of the houyhnhnms is founded on the existence of a subjugated people that they treat as animals.

The treatment of the yahoos as animals encourages us to accept them as animals; they draw sledges, they are killed for their skins and tallow, but in his physical descriptions of them Swift emphasises their humanity. When Gulliver's master unties one of them from the stable to show Gulliver, Gulliver recoils with horror.

My Horror and Astonishment are not to be described, when I observed, in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure; the

Face of it indeed was flat and broad, the Nose depressed, the Lips large, and the Mouth wide: but these Differences are common to all savage Nations, where the Lineaments of the Countenance are distorted by the Natives suffering their Infants to lie grovelling on the Earth, or by carrying them on their Backs, nuzzling with their Face against the Mother's Shoulders. The Fore-feet of the *Yahoo* differed from my Hands in nothing else, but the Length of the Nails, the Coarseness and Brownness of the Palms, and the Hairiness on the Backs. (IV.2;213–14)

In his description of them, Swift gives the yahoos markedly African features. The effect of this is not to suggest Africans are more debased, nearer to the bestiality of the yahoos; but to present the houyhnhnm society as a type of a colonial, or slave-owning, society. The Augustan rationality of the houyhnhnms is founded on a system of slavery, just as Britain's attempts at those Augustan values had an economic foundation in the African slaves working on the West Indian plantations. The society of reason is based economically on the exploitation of a people who are denied reason.

There are both probing radicalisms, and protective evasions in Swift's portrayal of the yahoos. He is certainly exposing exploitation; but he is also externalising it, distancing it from events *within* England or Ireland. His description of the yahoos has led to seeing them as racially denoted – not a class from the same race as their oppressors. Swift is avoiding dealing with the class war in England or Ireland. He presents a picture of racial oppression and exploitation. He stresses that the yahoos originally came from another place. They are physically distinct from the houyhnhnms. So that we can see the attack on colonialism in the final chapter of *Gulliver's Travels* as either a humane indictment of exploitation – or as an evasion to prevent his analysis from being applied to domestic politics, and the class oppressions and resentments there.

Gulliver's complaint about colonialism arises from his fear that the European yahoos could arrive and destroy the society of the houyhnhnms. The irony is that the European yahoos will destroy the houyhnhnms' society by introducing into it a system of exploitative relationships that the houyhnhnms themselves already impose on the yahoos. The houyhnhnms' treatment of the yahoos is the only example of a slave-owning or a colonial society in action that we

are given. But if the Europeans arrived, then they would naturally treat the houyhnhnms as beasts of burden, since they look like horses. What this means is indicated by the way the houyhnhnms already treat the yahoos. Although the yahoos were not the indigenous aboriginals invaded and colonised by the houyhnhnms, the way they are treated gives substance to the attack on colonialism with which Gulliver concludes his book. That attack is not an unintegrated diatribe, but an explicit handling of a theme that the previous chapters of Book IV have been presenting in action, in character.

A Crew of Pyrates are driven by a Storm they know not whither; at length a Boy discovers Land from the Top-Mast; they go on Shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless People, are entertained with Kindness, they give the Country a new Name, they take formal possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten Plank or a Stone for a memorial, they murder two or three Dozen of the Natives, bring away a Couple more by Force for a Sample, return home, and get their Pardon. Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by *Divine Right*. Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, their Princes tortured to Discover their Gold; a free Licence given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: And this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a *modern Colony* sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People. (IV.12;278)

The subjugation of the yahoos is the subjugation of a people, of a race. It bears a relationship to specific English practice just as Book I relates to the relationships between England and France in the early 18th century in specific detail, and as Lagado relates to specific practices of the Royal Society.

This account of the houyhnhnms' treatment of the yahoos suggests then an increase in political sophistication in the analyses presented through *Gulliver's Travels*. From the triviality and absurdity of Lilliputian politics where no ideas can be taken seriously, we move to the presentation of the theory of the mixed monarchy where the conflicting interests are presented as serious but innate, not really 'political', and conclude with the modern analysis of the

houyhnhnms' society as one founded on social and economic oppression.

The revelation of the political nature of the houyhnhnm society relates to the political themes of the earlier books in an important way: the revelation is expressed in terms of foreign policy. Swift's denunciation is of English colonialism: the houyhnhnms and yahoos are not members of the same race or nation, but quite distinct from each other; their relationship is one of racial or national domination, not class oppression. Similarly the indictment of Lilliput emerges as a result of the king's wanting to subjugate another nation, Blefuscu, not from the internal conduct of the kingdom. Writing about the domestic policies of Lilliput, Blefuscu, Brobdingnag, Laputa, Swift does not deal with internal class oppression. In so far as he analyses internal policies it is in terms of their absurdities or idiocies. He does not allow that there can be legitimate internal clashes. He accepts the theory of the three estates but deduces from it a harmonious compromise, not continual conflict. Irvin Ehrenpreis has summarised these views in 'Swift on Liberty':

His belief in mixed government, his opposing of the old, well-born, country families to the *nouveau-riche* moneylenders and tradesmen, his resentment of the rabble, and his loathing of oppression were all typical of the late seventeenth century. Under these he exhibits those neo-classical traits made familiar by A. O. Lovejoy as uniformitarianism, rationalistic anti-intellectualism, and a negative philosophy of history. (146)

Although in Book IV Swift is led to a criticism of economic practices in England, this theme is not developed. It is significant that this is introduced in the book in which he is showing the economic basis of the exploitation of the yahoos, suggesting again a deepening seriousness of analysis. But the sort of indictment he makes is of the moral nature of the king of Brobdingnag's attack on English practice. Gulliver declares in Book IV that

the rich Man enjoyed the Fruit of the poor Man's Labour, and the latter were a Thousand to One in Proportion to the former. That the Bulk of our People were forced to live miserably, by labouring every Day for small wages to make a few live

plentifully. I enlarged myself much on these and many other Particulars to the same Purpose: But his Honour was still to seek: For he went upon a Supposition that all Animals had a Title to their Share in the Productions of the Earth; and especially those who presided over the rest. (IV.6;235)

The last phrase makes it clear that though there are immoral inequalities in English practice, the essential theory is sound; the communistic 'all Animals had a Title to their Share in the Productions of the Earth' is explicitly defined as not communistic with the 'and especially those who presided over the rest.' Some in England are rewarded with too little. But the structures of authority, natural rulers, feudal ownership, capitalist investment – whatever form of authority – are not challengable. The 'natural rulers' 'especially' must profit.

In his attitudes to internal, to domestic political issues, Swift, as Orwell pointed out, though in many matters 'a rebel and iconoclast', 'cannot be labelled "Left"' (IV.57;253). But when he deals with the relationships between nations, then he recognizes and denounces oppressions. The explanation no doubt lies in part in his direct experiences of England's treatment of Ireland. There Swift encountered the receiving end of colonial oppression. But in terms of the domestic life of Ireland or England, his social position committed him to the perpetuation of a hierarchical system, and protected him from experiencing oppressions. The plan of the king of Lilliput to subjugate Blefuscu is seen as a serious issue: different nations should exist in equality. With the different orders, the three classes, Swift's commitment to co-existence, to balance, ensures his hostility to the attempts of either monarch, nobility, or people to achieve absolute domination; but it is a co-existence within a hierarchical system. That in no way disturbs him. The economic and hierarchical system by which the houyhnhnms oppress the yahoos is exposed to criticism only because Swift can present the relationship of the houyhnhnms to the yahoos as one of a different species, a different race, a different nation to each other: he can see it in terms of subjugation, colonial exploitation. But he has nothing to say, it is important to note, about the defined classes within the houyhnhnm society – the white, sorrel and iron-gray horses born in an inferior social station.

As the reader is led along through stages of developing political

sophistication in the first three books, there is the expectation that Book IV will offer a society freed from politics; but the pessimistic irony is that the houyhnhnms are politically organised after all. The final statement is that all societies are political and that all political societies are corrupt or exploitive or both. The same message is delivered throughout English political fiction – we find it again in *Nostromo*, in *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Swift's Christian perspective allows that minor moral improvements can be attempted. But man cannot ever escape from the political world. For the political world is the fallen world. Swift's Christian pessimism is akin here to Milton's argument in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* but whereas Swift deduces a conservatism, Milton recommended a revolutionary activism. Men were originally created free, Milton argued, and

they lived so, till from the root of Adams transgression, falling among themselves to doe wrong and violence, and foreseeing that such curses must needs tend to the destruction of them all, they agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury, and joyntly to defend themselves against any that gave disturbance or opposition to such agreement. Hence came Citties, Townes and Common-wealths. And because no faith in all was found sufficiently binding, they saw it needful to ordaine some authorities...These for a while governed well, and with much equitie decided all things at thir owne arbitrement: till the temptation of such a power left absolute in their hands, perverted them at length to injustice and partialitie... (351–2)

Milton's conclusion was, let us get rid of the corrupt and incompetent and try a new set of people and new systems. Since political systems were established because man was fallen, the individual systems had nothing sacred or sacrosanct about them.

Swift takes the conservative line. Political institutions and social organisations were established because man was fallen; and because man was fallen, they themselves were inevitably corrupt as institutions. Political structures are hence unavoidable, inevitable, necessary – and also inadequate and imperfectible. We will never get perfection, let's just leave things as they are for fear we get something worse. The point of view, of course, being Swift's comfortable social situation. A lot of things could be worse for Swift

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than the structure that allowed that; and Swift was aware of that, that was what he feared.

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