This is an issue which has to be traced back to its source in Halévy, and in the article which he wrote, called "The birth of Methodism," published in 1906 and recently translated and reprinted by the American historian, Bernard Semmel.¹ In this article the first significant reference to the links between Methodism and revolution states that "it is generally agreed that during the last years of the eighteenth century the influence of Methodism contributed a great deal to preventing the French Revolution from having an English counterpart."² Halévy's thesis, as it is often termed, is popularly connected with the allegedly stabilizing effect of Methodism on English society in the early 19th century, but in this article Halévy began by proposing that it is already agreed that Methodism helped to avert revolution in England in the late 18th century; then, in a later part of the essay, he argued more specifically that the birth of Wesleyanism was closely linked, and even causally connected, with a threat of profound social disturbance, if not revolution, in the late 1730's. It has sometimes seemed to me that one has only to state the wide-ranging nature of the claims which Halévy could make for Methodism as a pacifying influence in English affairs to make clear that something must be wrong with his assertions; on the other hand, one can boil down this series of events—the dangers of the 1730's, the 1790's, the 1830's and 40's, and even the late 19th century, when Halévy was still prepared to see the same process going on—into a single broad generalisation: that the Evangelical Revival, in all its forms, Anglican as well as Wesleyan, Baptist as well as Irvingite, played a decisive role in stabilising English society between the 1730's and 1900. At that level of generality it might almost be sufficient to observe that 18th and 19th century religious groups, in so far as they existed as distinct social influences, were apt to behave pacifically, so that it would require positive evidence to sustain the opposite position to Halévy's, that is, that throughout this period, or at any definite time within it, Evangelicals, Anglican, Wesleyan or other, acted as a socially disruptive force, either

² Ibid., p. 51.
making "revolution" more likely, or tending to make society more stable. And of course what does not rock the boat may be seen as helping to stabilise it. Halevy, however, had not this negative idea of social significance in mind.

Great problems of definition are raised here, and one of them involves the word "stability." Again and again Halevy returned to the claim that English society had shown itself more stable than French society, in as much as there had been no English equivalent of the French Revolution. As Bernard Semmel has pointed out, Halevy had found this idea in a general form in such writers as Guizot, Hippolyte Taine, and W. E. H. Lecky, whose History of England in the Eighteenth Century, in seven volumes, was published between 1878 and 1890. The argument that because a violent revolution happened in France in the 1790's, there must have been a potential revolution in England which was somehow prevented, has never convinced me; it sounds suspiciously like the Russian view that the revolution of 1917 must be followed by a similar event in Germany, a view which led to the disastrous Spartakist rising, which was not in itself evidence that a revolutionary situation existed in Germany at all. I think that it is very difficult to conceive the status of an allegedly historical event which ought to have happened according to some philosophy or interpretation of history, but which cannot be said actually to have taken place in time and space. It is all very well for E. P. Thompson, for example, to say that "in the 1790's something like an 'English Revolution' took place, of profound importance in shaping the consciousness of the post-war working class."3 On the following page he has himself to say that "if there was no revolution in England in the 1790's it was not because of methodism but because the only alliance strong enough to affect it fell apart; after 1792 there were no Girondins to open the doors through which the Jacobins might come. If men like Wedgewood, Boulton and Wilkinson had acted together with men like Hardy, Place and Binns--and if Wyvill's small gentry had acted with them--then Pitt (or Fox) would have been forced to grant a large instalment of reform. But the French Revolution consolidated Old Corruption by uniting landowners and manufacturers in common panic; and the popular societies were too weak or too inexperienced to affect

either revolution or reform on their own."4

This is a fascinating passage, but one cannot make a revolutionary situation out of so many "ifs." Moreover, Thompson here suggests that the French Revolution drove the industrial bourgeoisie into alliance with the status quo; if was was so—and if anything Thompson exaggerates the extent to which some such movement was necessary—one can hardly also assert that the French Revolution created an English revolutionary situation, for its major effect would have been to detach from potentially revolutionary groups the very leadership usually regarded as essential to their success, and this would amount to defusing the situation as a whole. There could then be no question, as Thompson admits in passing, of Methodism playing an important role in preventing revolution as such. Thompson errs semantically, it seems to me, in using the word "revolution" for the social unrest of the late 18th and early 19th century. He uses a more accurate term when he says of Luddism that "from one aspect, Luddism may be seen as the nearest thing to a 'peasant's revolt' of industrial workers; instead of sacking the châteaux, the most immediate object which symbolised oppression—the gig-mill or power-loom mill was attacked. Coming at the close of twenty years in which the printing-press and the public meeting had been virtually silent, the Luddites knew of no national leadership which they could trust, no national policy with which they could identify their own agitation."5

A revolt of "industrial peasants" does not, however, make a revolution. Dr. Thompson is right to talk of the complicity of whole working-class communities in Yorkshire and Nottingham in 1812 in the attacks on textile machinery and mills, but the scope and intentions of this violence remained limited, and it is not surprising that after 1815 the surviving Luddites put their energies into the campaign for parliamentary reform. In its primitive, classical form the concept of revolution meant a sudden, commonly violent, change of government; in the 18th century this idea of radical, violent, change had been coupled with predominantly humanistic dreams of a perfect society which could be attained by freeing men

4 Ibid., p. 195. Wedgwood, Boulton and Wilkinson represented the industrial group; Hardy, Place and Binns the working-man interests of the London Corresponding Society; Wyvill was a Yorkshire minister, a moderate reformer, active among the smaller gentry.
5 Ibid., pp. 656-57.
Methodism and Revolution

from the tyranny of kings and priests. There were English Jacobins who shared this ideology, but they had little obvious influence on the troubles in the textile mills. In such circumstances stability depended on the will of the governing groups to retain their position; and there is not the slightest reason to suppose that between 1789 and 1848 the occasional moments of panic which swept the possessing classes (e.g. 1797, 1812, 1832 and again at the height of the Chartist agitation), implied the kind of irresolution and lack of self-belief which normally herald the collapse of a social order.

In other words, if one defines "stability" in terms of the presence or absence of a revolution like that in France, one is bound to conclude that British society was "stable"; the conclusion is mistaken because the definition is misleading. There is no need to make what happened in France the rule for what happened in England. Looked at by itself for the moment English society showed many signs of instability (not of incipient revolution) between about 1760 and 1848. If one thinks of the American War of Independence as an English as well as an American event, however, it becomes clear, I suggest, that the important crisis of stability was situated before the French Revolution and not after it. The first and second American wars (1776 and 1812), while "freedom wars" on one side of the Atlantic and "status wars" on the other, were also a kind of renewal of the 17th century Civil War; in England as well as in the Colonies people were deeply divided, but it was in America that the aristocratic principle was abolished. Dr. Thompson has shown very clearly how already in the 1790's a chasm was opening between the new industrial working-class and the remainder of English society, a division which by the end of the 19th century would largely replace the older gulf between some sections of the ruling class and "historic Dissent"; but the vital socio-political decisions, which determined the degree of support which the working-class could expect from any "revolutionised bourgeoisie," had been made before 1789, and neither the Evangelical Revival nor religious influences in general made much difference to the outcome.6

6 The American war, that is, was not only about the political rights of the colonists under the old British constitution; it was about the kind of society which ought to exist on both sides of the Atlantic; the majority of the English middle-class supported the aristocracy in the defence of the traditional society and so committed
We must return, however, to Halévy's 1906 essay on the birth of Methodism. Halévy was not only concerned with the 1790's but with the early 18th century, and the next reference to "revolution" in the essay refers to this period. He had described how George Whitefield and John Wesley had begun to preach in the open air in 1739; now could one explain, he asked, the rapid spread of Wesleyanism after that date? "Just at the time when the religious revolution led by Wesley and Whitefield was beginning, a political revolution was under way in England. The simultaneous character of the two events is not, nor could it be, a pure coincidence; it seems that one must have been the effect of the other, or both the effect of an identical cause."

This is a good example of the looseness with which Halévy used his terms. When the word "revolution" is transferred to Wesley and Whitefield it loses any definite meaning; both men combined the rationalism of the age with a determination to go back religiously; they did not threaten their hearers with any kind of new revelation turned towards the future but threatened them with the spiritual consequences of not returning to the past. In a society in which the steady growth of peace, order and prosperity after the various tumults of the 17th century and the French War against Louis XIV produced guilt in many who felt a conflict between the new market-society humanism and the traditional Christian doctrine of the corruption of human nature, this approach proved profitable; but it was not "revolutionary," an adjective which suggests discontinuity, not the re-establishment of continuity with the past. Now it was characteristic even of John Wesley's idea of Christian perfection that this was a last-ditch effort to preserve the world-renouncing ascetic tradition by domesticating it within the market society: Wesley, one might say, sought to vulgarise Fénelon's amour pur.

The lack of logic in Halévy's argument should now be evident. On the religious, as distinct from the political, side of his thesis the birth of Wesleyanism was neither as dramatic nor as innovatory as Halévy, no England to opposition to the revolutionary ideology long before 1789. When the English poor emigrated to the United States in the 19th century, however, they often made a conscious choice of what seemed to them a freer and fairer society.

7 Semmel, op.cit., p. 62.
Methodism and Revolution

According to Halévy's argument (in the 1906 essay), Methodism began at a time when the once flourishing woollen industry which spread south from Bristol was going to ruin. He painted a vivid picture of day labourers marching against "the leading industrial towns, where the merchants resided. They plundered, they burned; they besieged the houses of the merchants....In Wiltshire, at Trowbridge, Bedford and Melksham, the disturbances became so serious that a state of siege was proclaimed and the soldiers were permanently quartered in these localities." Healy admitted that contemporary sources made little reference to this major crisis, which he coupled with the gradual collapse of Walpole's power: in fact, Halévy relied largely on Country Common-sense, by A Gentleman of Wiltshire, a series of essays which had appeared in the Gloucester Journal before being published together in 1739, and which took the side of the workers against the clothiers, a position not unpopular with the local gentry in Gloucestershire, who had their own reasons for disliking some of the local clothiers. The writer of the pamphlet has since been identified as either the elder or the younger Thomas Andrews of Seend, a village between Trowbridge and Devizes, and so close to the scene of the most persistent troubles in Wiltshire; J. de L. Mann, in The Cloth Industry in the West of England from 1640 to 1880 (Oxford 1971), says that "his eloquence made an impression throughout the country and has helped to create the widespread but untrue impression that the Wiltshire industry was already moribund." Halévy may be regarded as one of his victims.

It is certain that the woollen industry was an

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8 Ibid.
unhappy one. Mann says that "up to the middle of the century there was an almost continuous decline in rates for weaving."10 There were riots in Wiltshire and East Somerset in 1726-27 and in Gloucestershire in 1727; there were more riots in Wiltshire in 1738, when several people were hanged; there were to be further outbreaks in Gloucestershire in 1756; bitterness over the introduction of new machinery led to unrest which culminated in the burning of Littleton Mill near Trowbridge in 1802. There is nothing to suggest a potentially revolutionary situation at any point, however; the weavers usually acted in a legal manner in order to get what they believed to be their legal rights; it was the clothiers who normally disregarded legal obligations, and there is little evidence that they felt the need of Wesleyanism as a further restraint on their labour force. Indeed, J. de L. Mann observed that although the rise of the Sunday School movement in the 1780's did something to alleviate the economic distress in some parts of Gloucestershire, "It did nothing to reconcile the workers to their lot or to produce a more acquiescent attitude towards their masters."11 In this sense Halévy's statement of 1739 that "the despair of the working-class was the raw material to which Methodist doctrine and discipline gave a shape" implied a causal relation which he did not prove. Nor in view of the history of the West of England cloth Industry after 1739 is there much substance in his question: "Why, then, did the working-class agitation of 1738, after its violent beginnings, take the form of a religious and mystical movement whose ideal was after all extremely conservative, rather than terminating in social revolution?"12

Halévy's argument takes the form: (a) that revolution was possible in the late 1730's, if the working-class had stuck to a secular programme, and found adequate leadership; (b) that a drive in this direction, towards social conflict, was stopped; (c) that Whitefield and Wesley stopped the political process by transmuting secular to religious energies.

One finds it difficult to believe in (c) at all,
that is, that a desperate working-class which had already shown the ability to riot could be persuaded to forget its political needs and economic grievances; the evidence is that it did not, but that the vigour with which order was restored, whether at Melksham in 1738 or at Trowbridge in 1803, when Thomas Helliker was hanged for the burning of Littleton Mill, took the heart out of the agitation: this happened again in the late 1830's.

Halévy developed his theory a state further. The workers, huddled about industrial centres, required a doctrine, an ideal. They would naturally appeal to the bourgeoisie for leadership: but the middle-class, neither irreligious nor republican, gave to working-class discontent "a religious and conservative form."13 Therefore in the long run Wesleyanism expressed the will of the bourgeoisie to support a social order founded on an inequality of rank and wealth. That the English middle-class accepted the structure of the 18th century deference society was certainly true.

Halévy at this point brought his essay to an end rather precipitately, without appearing to consider that what he had really said was that the choice of revolution or acquiescence lay with the middle-class, not with the workers, and that therefore any explanation as to why there was no 18th century revolution in England (a question which has of course to be put with the qualifications which I have already outlined above), would have to be in terms of the bourgeoisie, and therefore need not be put in terms of Wesleyanism at all. Indeed, Halévy's whole generalisation seems to collapse in these concluding pages, where he necessarily admits that the bourgeoisie was neither atheistic nor republican nor genuinely bitter about rank: Arkwrights might envy the gentry but in the end he became the knight and squire that he had always wanted to be. There was no middle-class deep sense of economic frustration to demand the removal of a sick king, a puerile court and a government which could not even win the first American War. Why all this was so seems to have had little to do with the existence of the Wesleyan societies; the origins of those societies remain something of a mystery, which can be solved best by adding together a large number of different explanations. As to the general question, what remains of Halévy's invocation of the word "revolution" is the general, vague proposition that the religious factor, limited in Halévy's

13 Ibid., p. 75.
definition to Evangelicalism but obviously not so limited in historical fact, played a decisive stabilising role in English society between the 1730's and 1900. In other words, the problem towards which Halévy was drawing attention was the relation between religion and change, in a situation in which, in the 18th century, among the most forceful agents of change were the new industrialists. Religion did not inhibit their appetite for change, any more than did the fresh religious vitality of the Victorian period. As for the working-classes, there is no evidence that they considered revolution in the 18th century, or that religious forces drew them away into safer kinds of meditation. Halévy was wrong about the proletarian influence of Methodism in the 18th century. In the 19th century, however, small groups of working-class people set up Methodist institutions. If Halévy were right, the effect of these would again have been to delay (not prevent) change. When we consider specific working-class groups, however, like the struggling Primitive Methodist mining societies in the Somerset coalfield round Midsomer Norton and Radstock, one concludes, first that they spent most of their time in a struggle to survive at all, and consequently had little effect on the industrial situation; and (b) that one cause of their weakness was their inability to dominate or alter the political moods and methods of the workers. In specific cases of this kind, the role of the religious group seems neither "revolutionary" nor "conservative," but that of a spectator.