

John Thelwall, “The PRESENT WAR a principal cause of the STARVING CONDITION of the PEOPLE.” – The first lecture “On the causes of the Dearthness and Scarcity of Provisions”; delivered...on Wednesday, April 29th, 1795. (*The Tribune*, No. XVI)

In the course of these rambles I have dropped, occasionally, into the little hedge ale-houses to refresh myself. I have sat down among the rough clowns, whose tattered garments were soiled with their rustic labours; for I have not forgot that all mankind are equally my brethren; and I love to see the labourer in his ragged coat—that is I love the labourer: I am sorry his coat is obliged to be so ragged... I have mixed, therefore, with these people; and I have grieved to hear their sentiments. Commotion and violence they can readily commend. They can applaud the frantic proceedings of those, who have seized upon the shambles, the mills, and the bakers’ shops; and thus have endeavoured, by their arbitrary proceedings, to reduce the price of provisions. Thus far they think the interference of the people right: But as to political enquiry, to this they are too many of them dead. The generality of them still cherish the prejudices that have caused their misery. They hate a Frenchman, for being a Jacobin, as much as they formerly hated him for wearing *wooden shoes*, tho’ they know no more of the meaning of the word *Jacobin*, than they did before of the guilt that was attached to shoes of wood. Nay too many of them idolize the name of a contemptible wretch¹ whose father’s reputation was the sole cause of his popularity, and whom a few grains of enquiry would lead them to execrate as the author of that very scarcity of which they complain. I have argued with these men upon the impropriety of tumult and violence: for I abhor commotion more than I abhor any thing, except despotism and corruption; and I never meet with advocates of violence, but I endeavour to show him its wickedness and absurdity. But, alas, the uninformed mass love this violence. They uphold the propriety of it, because they are ignorant of the real sources of their calamities; because they do not know that the miller, the baker, and the butcher, against whom their violence is directed, are as much oppressed as

¹ William Pitt the Younger, the Prime Minister.

themselves; and that they must look higher if they would find the real instruments of their oppression; that they must think more deeply, if they would learn the means by which that oppression is to be removed.

The fact is, as I shall shew you in the course of this enquiry, that though the causes are multifarious indeed, that have produced this oppression, the greater portion of them is to be traced to the errors, to the vices, to the selfish usurpations of those ministers, and their predecessors, who think that no man has rights who was not wrapped in a swaddling band of ermine, and that no man can be entitled to reason, unless he has, either in possession or expectation, a bit of blue ribbon, or a few gold and silver spangles embroidered on his night-gown.

There can be no doubt that the advocates of administration must be anxious enough to prevent enquiry; because enquiry must point out who are the causes of the wrong; and what is the mode by which redress is to be obtained. There is no doubt that tumult and violence are pleasant things to them; because they give them pretences for giving additional force to the arm of authority; and for drawing tighter those reins of government, which, though the poor may bleed at the mouth while the gag presses hard upon them, it is pleasant enough for those who only drive, and whip, and spur them, to the holding the hard hand. They, therefore, have little objection to the butcher, the baker, or the miller being sacrificed to the ignorant indignation of the people, provided thereby they avert the dreaded calamity of calm enquiry, and shun the light of political truth, which brings conviction to the minds of the people, and threatens, by the unanimous sentiment of virtue and justice which it might inspire, to drive them and their crimes from the seat of power. This they must abhor; because whenever unanimous sentiment of common sense and justice shall prevail among mankind, down drops the curtain upon the mighty puppets of the day; the wires they have been moved by, will no longer make them perform their evolutions, and Punchinello and his family strut in their embroidered robes no more.
