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**CLASS & COMMON INTEREST**

What were the effects of the Industrial Revolution on class and class consciousness in Britain? How did industrialisation affect the standard of living of the British? These questions and a study of Joseph Wright of Derby are the issues in this second special feature on the Industrial Revolution.

CLASS IS ABOUT POWER. THE HISTORY of social class is about the way in which men and women gained power over others, about how they used that power, how they maintained that power, and how those 'others' responded. Class is about power in government, in the state, about power over ideas, but above all social class is about power in the relationships which produce and distribute goods and services. Somewhere between 1780 and 1850, the way in which people in Britain experienced and thought about these relationships changed.

Except for sociologists and politicians, few people experience class in grand speeches or theories, so it is necessary to turn to two incidents, one well known, and the other encapsulated for ever in the dull amber of a parliamentary commission.

On August 16th, 1819, the Manchester Yeomanry rode into a massive crowd attending a radical meeting in St Peter's Fields, Manchester. They wanted to arrest Henry Hunt and other radical leaders addressing the meeting. At some point, the Yeomanry, through fear or their own dislike of the hooting and dense packed crowd, began cutting and slashing with their drawn sabres. The exits to the square were blocked by soldiers and special constables. The scene which greeted Samuel Bamford, weaver and leader of people who had marched that morning from the village of Middleton, was a scene which lived in popular memory for many generations:

The cavalry were in confusion: they evidently could not, with all the weight of man and horse, penetrate that compact mass of human beings; and their sabres...
were pried to hew a way through naked held up hands, and defenceless heads; and then chopped limbs, and wound gaping skulls were seen; and groans and cries were mingled with the din of that horrid confusion... 'for shame! for shame!' was cried... white vested maids and tender youths were trampled... few were the instances in which that forbearance was vouchsafed, which they so earnestly implored...

As a result eleven people died and at least 500 were injured. This outcome was not planned by William Hulton, the magistrate who gave the order to disperse the crowd. It was more than the result of a technical error in crowd control by the military. Behind these deaths was the challenge of new ideas which were demanding fundamental changes in the distribution of power and the resentment and fear with which these ideas were met by those who had power. That crowd had come to mistrust their rulers after a generation in which adequate food and employment had come only sporadically. Planned or not, once the sabres were out the antagonism of the yeomanry, 'the shopkeepers on horseback' to the radical crowd was soon evident. Specific leaders, like Saxton, were picked out by the horsemen. Others showed their contempt for the radical cause with cries of 'Have at their flags'. Some shouted in derision, 'Damn you I'll reform you', as the crowd was violently dispersed.

In May 1833, gentlemen of a Royal Commission appointed by parliament visited Leeds. Their task was to examine the case for legislation to limit the hours children worked in textile factories. In the course of hearing evidence, they recorded a great deal about the social relationships of wage labour and employers in those factories. A world was revealed full of dependence, violence, humiliation, degradation and derision. Charles Binns worked in the preparation department of the flax spinning mill of Hives and Atkinson. The boys were forbidden to go to the lavatory or 'necessary' except at a number of restricted times of the day:

I have wet my clothes many a time, with not been let go to the necessary. I heard of a boy that wanted to go the necessary bar. His name was Trenham, and he was took badly with it, and went home and died. He was badly a good bit before he died... They would not let him go, and when his time came between four and five, he could do nothing... There was a lad that worked aside of me telled me he had dirtied his breeches not being let go... it was herding his muck that made him badly.

It was nasty little story and Messrs Hives and Atkinson were very upset when it got into parliamentary evidence. They did everything they could to prove the boys' story was wrong and put pressure on the families of both boys to retract the story.

The key figure in the factory was the overlooker. He mediated between the owners and wage labour. Stephen Binns was overlooker in a different flax establishment to that in which his son worked:

I was general manager. I was compelled not only to allow it, but to practise it (beating). I had a certain quantity of work to perform per week. I was expected to perform it as cheap as I could. I therefore engaged as few hands as possible. There was no contract between me and my master relating to it. My wages were regular. It was an understanding... They expected the yarn to cost so much a bundle. If it cost more I should be called to account, and might have endangered my situation.

It was unlikely that Trenham died for exactly the reasons that young Binns believed. What mattered was that in the sub-culture of the factory such a tale was repeated and believed. Behind this incident and the hostility implied by the evidence were several factors. Again there were massive inequalities of power as at Peterloo, but the relationship was directed by the new working arrangements and technology of the factory, and by the impersonal power of the market compelling employer and overseer to drive their labour force in the search for profit.

The anger and the deaths in the radical meeting and in the flax mills of Leeds were two incidents amongst countless thousands which were the raw material of class experience during the 'industrial revolution'. A more reflective observer was James Kay an Edinburgh trained doctor, evangelical in upbringing and committed to the creation of an orderly, rational and harmonious manufacturing society. When he wrote The moral and physical condition of the working classes employed in the cotton manufacture in Manchester, his perception of social structure had been heightened by two experiences. As physician to the Ardwick and Ancoates Dispensary he had watched the progress of cholera across
Manchester, killing 874 people through violent and painful dehydration. The disease mostly affected the poor and working classes, but because, as we now know, it was water borne it threatened and occasionally killed wealthier people. Disease was as much an aspect of class relationships as radical ideas and factory discipline. In addition, Kay, an ambitious professional man with little personal wealth and only £300 a year, was unwise enough to fall in love with Helen Kennedy, oldest daughter of one of the wealthiest cotton spinners in Manchester. The suit was doomed to failure, '...my mother has already put you in possession of her sentiments' wrote Helen in 1834, but training and experience sharpened Kay's perception of what was happening to British society.

Between the manufacturers of the country, staggering under the burdens of an enormous taxation and a restricted commerce; between them and the labouring classes subjects of controversy have arisen and consequent animosity too generally exists. The burdens of trade diminish the profits of capital, and the wages of labour, but bitter debate arises between the manufacturers and those in their employ, concerning the proper division of that fund, from which these are derived. The bargain for the wages of labour develops organized associations of the working classes, for the purpose of carrying on the contest with the capitalist... a gloomy spirit of discontent is engendered, and the public are not infrequently alarmed by the wild outbreak of popular violence...

What then was happening? Soldiers attacking crowds, children dying, men rejected in love were nothing new, but the intensity and the sense of conflict generated by the inequalities thus revealed was increasing. Instinctively historians tend to look towards the 'factories'. They were new; they were associated with large units of production which help create a sense of common interest amongst their wage labour force; they were associated with a harsh work discipline of fines, beatings and dismissals; they were the focus of violent strikes and trades union organisation. Factories can only be a small part of any account of increasing class consciousness. Even in 1838, factory production was limited to certain processes in the cotton, wool, flax and silk manufactures: some 422,000 people out of a labour force of seven million. Workplace relationships were crucial to class consciousness, but the changes were much more general than the factory and the steam engine. In many jobs technology was disturbing established working relationships, in weaving, in nail making and amongst the keelmen of north east.

England. In each case market forces destroyed the ability of employers to pay the sort of wages which their workforce had come to expect. In other occupations employers were continually seeking ways of re-organising work, through minor changes in technology and increasing sub-division of labour and closer supervision and discipline of labour. This reduced the skill needed and hence the amount of highly paid wage labour. It increased the speed of production and intensity of labour. Tailoring, furniture making and boot and shoe making had been affected in this way by the 1840s and building and printing were soon to follow. Many of the new jobs created by the industrial revolution were little affected by steam and technology. Coal-getting long remained a sweat and muscle job. Steam pumps and the Davy 'safety' lamp enabled the miner to go deeper into more dangerous seams, but the basic work was still with shoulders, pick and shovel. Nowhere was consciousness of common interest amongst wage labour greater than amongst the mining communities of the 1840s.

Conflict between those with power and those with no power over wages and over the use of state power was nothing new. The eighteenth century had been punctuated by grain riots in periods of poor harvest. Crowds, often dominated by women, took over markets and commandeered grain stores and grain carts.

On many occasions they took the grain, distributed it at a 'fair' price and paid the traders and farmers. This conflict was different from those of Peterloo, the Short Time committees and the trades disputes of Manchester. The grain riot conflict, nasty and dangerous though it was, could be resolved without fundamental changes in the distribution of legitimate power in British society. The eighteenth-century wage disputes, the smashing of new machines which threatened existing working practices and the attacks upon parliamentary enclosure marked other conflict points but none of these sought to alter the basic rights of rulers and capitalists, only to restore the rights of labour.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, several things were to change this structure of conflict within a stable social structure. First, somewhere
around 1760 Britain changed from a grain exporting to a grain importing country. This meant that when the harvest was poor and the rioters demanded bread, the authorities could no longer simply pull back supplies from the export market. Many grain riots had been resolved by the magistrates intervening to ensure the grain merchants distributed their supplies locally at the 'fair' price. With no surplus this task was not as easy as it had been. Secondly, an important group of industries in textiles and metal goods manufactures began to depend heavily on foreign trade in Europe and the United States. Demand in these markets fluctuated with the impact of war and the trade cycle. Thus employers could not sustain regular and orderly employment for their skilled labour force. Further, to try and survive in such slumps, employers began cost cutting through the re-organisation of labour and new technologies. Those who refused to change were those who risked bankruptcy in the slumps. Hence when the radicals attacked the employers for the oppression of labour, they blamed 'competition', and not 'capitalism' as a later socialist critic might have done.

Finally, by the 1830s and 1840s, the new technologies began to have widespread impact as the spinning frames and power looms spread from cotton to other textiles and the slitting and pressing machines became more efficient. Many of the jobs created by the industrial revolution were unaided by machine for many decades; the tailors and dressmakers who used the new cheap cloth, the miners who dug coal for the steam engines and the thousands of domestic servants, mostly girls in their teens and early twentines, who were employed by the new wealth of the middle classes. Behind all this was a rapidly rising population which formed an abundant labour supply for a labour market which offered bewildering fluctuations in prosperity and poverty, of pride in work and degradation.

The way in which men and women responded to these situations depended upon the ideas and experience which they had available. In 1791, Thomas Paine gathered together a variety of ideas which had been current in eighteenth-century radical discourse and forged them into Part One of The Rights of Man. His prose has a directness and simplicity which is still powerful.

I. Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility.

II. The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; and these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression.

Popular response was immediate. By 1793, an estimated 200,000 copies had been sold, including many cheap editions. Response was immediate because memory and recent events showed that Paine’s ideas were in the realm of the possible. The French had defeated their monarchy. Those radical heroes, the American rebels, had defeated the British monarchy. There were dim memories that the British had once beheaded their own king. Cromwell was a radical folk hero. This response was also linked to the continuing failure of the British ruling class to provide adequate food and employment. There were ‘five or six mechanicks...conversing about the enormous high price of provisions’ who went on to form the Sheffield Constitutional Society. This was amongst the first of a long line of societies formed to demand universal suffrage and democratic parliaments in Britain.

From the Corresponding Societies through the crowds at St Peter’s Fields to the Chartists of the 1840s and beyond, the British class response to the experience of oppression and degradation has been to demand more and better democratic representation. This was Paine’s gift to class consciousness in Britain, which still reverberates in current political argument. In part this was because in the 1790s the division between labour and capital was still imperfect. Most people still worked in small units. Defending the rights of property was to defend the property of the small master, who had begun as a journeyman, from the oppression of taxes imposed by a war-mongering ruling class. Paine and his followers talked of ‘the people’ and not ‘the working class’. Rents and taxes not profits were attacked for their exploitation. It was not until the 1840s that people like Hetherington and Ernest Jones began writing about the oppressive relationship of labour and capital. Even then it was the suffrage issue which dominated political agitation. The ideas of Thomas Paine made a major contribution to class ideology during the nineteenth century. Because they originated in a period before clear division
had taken place between capital and labour in many occupations, they contained none of the notions of expropriation of property which later socialist theories thought necessary. This was of major assistance to the continued alliance of a radical, then a liberal, middle class with a politically conscious working class—which was characteristic of Gladstonian liberalism in nineteenth-century Britain—and perhaps even in certain aspects of the twentieth-century Labour Party.

Ideas could only be spread, developed and practised as ideology through organisation. At the end of the eighteenth century, working people had available to them the riot, the political club and the craft union or friendly society. All were locally based and in general were devoted to upholding traditional values. Even Paineite claims were held by some to be a demand for the restoration of the rights of the Saxons against the Norman Yoke (aristocratic oppression).

The political club continued in many forms discussing a variety of plans and ideas in taverns, upper rooms and private houses. In terms of organisation, the dominant forms were those which continued the campaign for universal suffrage that culminated in Chartism. As an organisation Chartism had several distinctive features. It was a national movement which asserted this identity by holding a National Convention in London. This sense of national identity was increased by Feargus O’Connor who made skilled use of the new technologies of the steam press and the railway. These enabled him to produce and distribute the *Northern Star* as a national newspaper. Chartists could not only read about their own meetings, but could ponder on the speeches and identify with the crowds in Trowbridge, Spitalfields, Glasgow and elsewhere. Chartism was self-consciously working class. The address of the London Working Men’s Association which began the new movement of 1836 began ‘Fellow labourers’, but true to its Paineite origin the Chartist constituency often widened to include shopkeepers, small masters and professional men, ‘the producing classes’ as one petition phrased it. Chartism was also a disciplined movement which had left behind the folk violence of the grain riots and machine breakers. The drilling in the fields which so frightened the upper classes was as much to ensure order at demonstrations as for para-military preparation. There clearly were preparations for armed risings in 1839, but skilful and ruthless action by the state and the lack of will amongst many Chartists turned Chartism into a constitutional movement of petitions and demonstrations.

In terms of class relationships the most important organisation which developed during the period of the industrial revolution was the industrial union. Despite initial legal prohibition and continual defeats, the wage labour force of the textile industries created and re-created mass regionally based industrial unions for factory and non-factory portions of the labour force. The basic unit was the friendly society, a traditional workplace and neighbourhood organisation which offered assistance in sickness, death and unemployment to members. These were welded together into regional unions by men like John Doherty who organised the Lancashire cotton spinners. There were temporary victories but efforts to prevent wage reductions in the slumps usually ended in defeats. Doherty turned to the ideas of Robert Owen which suggested that co-operative production was the answer. He also sought national organisation for the cotton unions in an effort to stop blacklegging and competition between regions. Owenite ideas remained attractive to the unionists but it was the slow development of formal, disciplined, national trades unions which made a lasting contribution to class identity and relationships. The builders in the 1830s and the miners in the 1840s were to follow the cotton spinners’ experience of organisation and defeat. It was the joining of this tradition of industrial unionism with the older craft union tradition in the Trades’ Union Congress in 1868 which formed the basis of formal class organisation in Britain. Despite the central experience of conflict over wages and working practices during the industrial revolution, there was still a double mood in labour relations. The stuff weavers of Leeds took part in 1831 in a bitter, violent, stone throwing,web-smashing strike, yet a few months later the leaders of the union were joining with the leading employers on the platforms of a public meeting to petition parliament for a tax on power looms. The development of capitalism and industrial technology during the industrial revolution was uneven, the divisions between labour and capital imperfect, and the development of class consciousness and relationships reflected this.

The period of the industrial revolution saw a change in the nature, mood and perception of conflict over the control of production, the control of the state, and over the distribution of goods and services, but it was not until the late years of the nineteenth century, perhaps even the Edwardian years, that class consciousness and organisation reached a point where Marx’s account of social class becomes a description and not a prediction. When the early years of the twentieth century forged a coherent labour movement, the class consciousness of that movement inherited from the past a passionate respect for parliamentary democracy and a dependence upon trades union organisation which was the legacy of the years of early and partial class formation during the industrial revolution period.


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The motto of the felt-makers which headed a trade union list of resolutions in 1820.