

Class, Culture and Community

Class, Culture and Community:
New Perspectives in Nineteenth and Twentieth
Century British Labour History

Edited by

Anne Baldwin, Chris Ellis, Stephen Etheridge,
Keith Laybourn and Neil Pye

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SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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This volume is respectfully dedicated to the memory of Jack Reynolds (1915-1988) and David Gordon Wright (1937-1995), pioneers of ideas of community, culture and class history.

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INTRODUCTION

When postgraduate students met at the University of Huddersfield in November 2010, to debate aspects of Labour history, under the auspices of the Society for the Study of Labour History, the event started with a round-table discussion. That debate, entitled “Politics or People? The true history of Labour identities” set the scene for an eclectic collection of papers that probed several themes emerging in the construction of working-class and Labour identities. Those themes are reflected in the selection of papers presented in this work. They represent the current revival in Labour history which has emerged in a form that brings together community and culture alongside class and political representation to explore the breadth and depth of working-class identity. These themes are presented in the following four sections on the culture of communities; the Labour movement, trade unions and organised communities; political communication and ideology; ending with radicalism and conflict.

The focus on components of identity and sense of place illustrates the potential future of Labour history. Indeed, the first three chapters, focusing on community and on localised struggle illustrate the rich tapestry of events and activities that make up community-based history. Yet even those contributions that examine aspects of the political representation of Labour do so from a perspective that acknowledges the importance of place and identity. Christopher Massey in Chapter Seven, for example, stresses the relevance of one MP with a direct link to steel production in Middlesbrough in his reassessment of debate on nationalisation of the steel industry in 1945-1951; Maria Novella Vitucci, in Chapter Ten, also explores the relevance of national identity in her consideration of attitudes to emigration in the mid-nineteenth century.

A second theme that transcends the decades is that of press perception. It is the starting point of Alex Jackson’s take on the 1912 National Coal Strike (Chapter One), but also underpins Chris Hill’s examination of the difficult debates of 1957-61 around defence policy (Chapter Eight). The conflicts those two articles describe also highlight the extent to which Labour history remains a story of struggle, whether the direct struggle of

one group of workers within an industry or the wider struggle to reconcile radical socialist demands with democratic representation and pragmatic political decision making. That struggle is seen as having many starting points, but the suppression of Chartism (again with a localised context) remains one of the most controversial. Neil Pye, in Chapter Nine, summarises his work on the events that many see as a bedrock of Labour history, the fundamental clash between authority and working-class demands for greater democracy. The prime focus throughout this work though is on people, be it the contributions of individuals to particular policy areas or the interaction of working people at a local level. The work therefore starts with three papers that add to debate about identity.

The culture of communities

The identity of labouring people is inescapably entwined with notions of community. Eric Hobsbawm argues that many metonyms of working-class communities were ‘invented’ between 1870-1914. The working-class world of labour with a capital L, cup-finals, fish-and-chip suppers, children’s games in the street, community singing, performing *The Messiah* in crowded town halls and the palais-de-danse, that Richard Hoggart wrote bitter-sweet elegies about in the 1950s, all have their roots in images and memories of community.¹ The strength of these images resonated with commentators and programme makers in the media from the 1950s onwards. The difficulty of historical interpretation is that these are rose-tinted images of the past. Joanna Bourke argues that writers such as Richard Hoggart elaborated upon and romanticised about their past experiences, fostering the use of the phrase, “working-class community”, to invoke images of the past where neighbours were always helpful and doors were always open. Bourke reflected Raymond William’s argument that, “unlike other terms of social organisation; memories of community were mostly positive and hardly used unfavourably”.² Bourke argues that much of the rhetoric of community existed only in people’s imaginations, naturally leading to reminiscences being only positive, any negative and painful memories have been diluted over time. In other words, people remembered what they *felt* a working-class community should be as opposed to remembering the long working hours, poor housing and hostile neighbours.³

Beatrice Webb’s visits to Bacup, in the Rossendale Valley, in Lancashire, for example, which, in the late nineteenth-century, was a typical Pennine industrial town, highlighted that community life could be

edited to reflect the commentator's view of what they thought a community should be. Webb's first visited relations there in 1883: this was followed by visits in 1886 and 1889.⁴ She felt that Bacup was still part of an old and traditional world, writing:

It knows nothing of the complexities of modern life ...its daily existence likens the handloom village of a century ago. ...They are content with the doings of their little town-and say that even in Manchester they feel oppressed and not "homely like".⁵

Webb's homely descriptions of Bacup are its weakness when considering notions of community. Influenced by her "respectable" working-class relations she visited the town with preconceived notions that working-class life revolved around the pivotal points of factory, Co-operative associations and chapel.⁶ Webb, however, did not comment on the proletarian culture of Bacup. In 1887, Rossendale had 212 public houses, 12 of these were close to her lodgings. The month when she first visited saw six cases of drunk and disorderly, two cases of public brawling, an alleged assault on a publican and one case of drunk in charge of a horse, brought before the Police Court.⁷ Communities, then, held conflicting images of respectability and roughness tensions often spilling over into violence that reached the court.⁸

Historians, then, should be prudent about reminiscences about the positive aspects of community life; together with the dualities of respectability and roughness are conflicts of definition that leads to confusion of the term's usage. Alan Macfarlane's survey of the extensive literature using the concept of "community" considered ninety-four separate definitions, concluding that, "all the definitions dealt with people, apart from this there is no common definition".⁹ Reflecting socialist arguments that the term was used as a barrier against the power of the police and other civil authorities, David B. Clark argues that, "the two fundamental *communal* elements of any social system are a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance".¹⁰ Solidarity being, "we- feeling", or, "the feeling that leads people to identify themselves with others so that when they say 'we' there is no thought of distinction and when they say 'ours' there is no thought of division."¹¹ Writers often inferred this unspoken solidarity when they referred to the social unity of community. It encompassed the feelings that brought people together: sympathy, courtesy, gratitude, trust and so on. In this country solidarity over individuality was highly prized in post-war cinema, with films such as: *Whiskey Galore* (1949), *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) and *The Titfield*

Thunderbolt (1953) recognising the actions of the community in overcoming confrontational problems.¹² Clark argues that the notion of community sacrifices individual significance over group solidarity, writing that, “the preoccupation with solidarity has led to the neglect of the second essential communal element: a sense of significance or, a sense of place or station: a sense that within communities each person has a function to fulfil within various social exchanges”.¹³

Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* examined the influence of mass culture upon Hunslet, a working-class community in Leeds.¹⁴ Working-class lives were governed by numerous civic officials that had a bewildering array of paperwork that separated the working class from those in power. Working-class community was defined by the difference between the authorities, “them”, and the working class “us”. The phrase “working-class community” became a rhetorical device that secured emotive feelings group solidarity and identity, it became a all-embracing phrase for “us”, encompassing home, family, work, security and ethnicity.¹⁵ Beatrice Webb and Richard Hoggart advocated place-based communities: communities built around the formality of work, home and religion.¹⁶ Recently, however, writers, such Ted Bradshaw, have argued that community based around formal institutions is no longer useful unless it disentangles place and the institutions of place from the social relations that constitute community.¹⁷ From the mid-nineteenth century the increase in working-class leisure time produced eclectic social groups such as, brass bands, choirs, allotment societies, amateur dramatic groups, walking and cycling societies, football teams, rugby teams and cricket teams, who, through the railway, could take their community identities beyond the local to the regional, national, and, in the case of brass bands, the international stage. Communal identities, then, developed through networks of people that had common goals: representing community identity that travelled beyond a town’s geographical boundaries. Communities had become mobile. It became prevalent to link the idea of community to a people that could carry their identities with them as a group.¹⁸

Inevitably, the concept of community has become a popular, important and contested issue within historical writing.¹⁹ Despite the contention the notion has become part of the language in which historians account for how people lived their lives. As such it enters into ways in which the historian expresses ideas of, solidarity, interest and identity, which are central to life in a community. It is important to recognise the social

construction of communities, and the terms of acceptance to their membership, as what it takes to become accepted within the group can vary wildly. How does the individual become part of the “We” of the community group? How does that group go on to represent communities, and, what do communities expect in return? From the mid-nineteenth century onwards brass bands, for example, could often use the notion of community to justify their place in the world. Writing in 1915, for example, *Wright and Round's Brass Band News* insisted that bandsmen should be gentlemen in the community, stating, “social standing depends far less on wealth... force of character and rectitude of conduct to become an increasing factor in determining the standing of a man in the community...”²⁰ Communities, therefore, are defined not only by relationships between members, among whom there is similarity, but also by the relations between these insiders and outsiders, who are distinguished by their difference and consequent exclusion.²¹ Community is a deeply evocative term which is likened to, class, gender, ethnicity or race in its power to describe relationships.²² Therefore, despite confusion over definition and a trait to over romanticise its use, now is the time to re-explore notions of community.

The three chapters in Section One deal with a variety of community experiences. Alexander Jackson is very much concerned to indicate how a view of a community, in this case the miners of Barnsley and south Yorkshire in 1912, can be created by the newspapers to perpetuate a myth that the coal miners were more interested in having an holiday in order spend more time with their whippets and that, somehow, they were indifferent to their families. It was a newspaper myth that came to familiarise the British people with a group of workers who they wished to defame and did not care to understand. In contrast, Stephen Etheridge's chapter on brass bands is much more about how working-class brass bands emerged to take control of their own leisure activities from industrialists with a desire to create their own place in the community, with their calendar of events and trade identity through their performance. Finally, Laura Price, dealing with the post- Second World War years, reveals that varying ethnicity between the Asian and the White textile workers continued to operate to restrict their interaction and integration in the West Yorkshire textile district in the absence of a powerful trade union movement and other ligatures that could have established greater integration and partly as a consequence of the “bussing” policy of Bradford Council which did not produce the integration that was being sought.

Trade Unions and Organised Communities

Class, community and culture of protest are redolent in the two chapters in this book dealing with trade unions and working-class protest in industrial relations that appear in Section Two. Trade unions in Britain probably enjoyed their greatest influence, their finest hour, in the thirty years following the end of the Second World War. During that period they sealed their relationship with the Labour Party and, as Peter Dorey has indicated in *British Conservatism and Trade Unionism, 1945-1964* that, there were even good relations between the trade unions and the Conservative Party.²³ However, from the mid-1960s conflict with both the Labour and Conservative governments began to change attitudes towards British trade unionism and the Thatcher and Major Conservative governments, from 1979 to 1997, challenged their authority and purpose. The subsequent governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did little to reverse the decline of trade unionism. With the destruction of the coal miners' trade unionism, during the miners' strike of 1984/5, and the undermining of trade unions, working-class protest groups and trade unions exercised declining influence and numbers. Indeed, despite sterling efforts by a variety of working-class organisations, the history of working-class protest has been one of ultimate failure and decline since the 1960s. Two chapters in this volume deal with the valiant attempt to raise the issue of unemployment and to challenge the persistent onset and decline in Britain's traditional industries. The core of both chapters is the exploration of conflict, unemployment, industrial relations and alienated community. One theme that is present throughout is the conflict with the difficulties caused by the governments of the period in attempting to deal with the problem of employment and the workforce in Liverpool and the West Lothian region of Scotland.

Catriona Louise MacDonald's chapter deals with the industrial relations at BMC Bathgate between the 1960s and 1980s. Essentially the opening of the Bathgate motor manufacturing plant was designed to ameliorate the high levels of unemployment and stimulate growth in an area which was badly affected by the rundown of its traditional industries. MacDonald suggests that there existed a problem between the workers who had been led to believe that they could expect more stable and better-paid employment and the reality of the unreliable nature of the work. The essay also examines the extent to which the experiences through oral testimonies, of the factory workers were shaped by their industrial relations with the Midland's motor manufacturing counter-part.

Brian Marren's chapter relates to distinctive and innovative working-class responses to redundancies and closures in Merseyside in the era of Thatcherism. Marren argues the exceptionalism of the Liverpool responses. Through six case studies he explores the variety and intensity of conflict to the varying social and industrial problems. Moreover, he also points to the long tradition of militancy and popular radicalism within Liverpool. In addition the underlying causes to each situation that provoked the conflict are explored. In essence the essay documents what Marren describes as the "unmaking" of the British working class during the twentieth century.

Political representation and Labour ideology

Traditionally, the debates on political representation have focused upon broad issues encompassing the radicalism of the nineteenth century, Chartism, the political reform movement and the rise of Labour and the ever-widening participation of labour and Labour in British politics. For instance in the rise of Labour debate, George Dangerfield wrote about *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935) indicating that Labour emerged from the 1906 general election onwards when the Liberal Party was no longer the part of the left and through the trade unions the working class allied with the Labour Party. Debates have raged ever since about whether class politics was the basis of the success of the Labour Party (Dangerfield, Henry Pelling, Ross McKibbin, Keith Laybourn and others) or whether Labour's success came at the expense of a Liberal Party, blighted by the "rampant omnibus" of the Great War (Trevor Wilson and many others).

Indeed, class, culture and politics have been as equally contentious grounds for debate as community. Whilst Karl Marx, Marxist writers and labour historians have maintained the existence of class the more recent challenge, led particularly by Patrick Joyce, has been to suggest that whilst work and religion might unite people in large numbers class, as a unifying force bringing large numbers of people together, never actually existed: it was a myth conjured up by Marx. This was evident in his book *Work, Society and Politics* and other works.²⁴ This structuralist versus the post-structuralist debate has run its course since the mid 1970s and victories have been won on both sides. The famous "Labour aristocracy debate", revived by John Foster in his pioneering book *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (1974) the has now been won by the post-structuralists who have pretty well disproved the suggestion that it was the Labour aristocrats who sold out to capitalist society and undermined the

revolutionary mood which Marx saw as likely to produce a revolution in Britain in the late 1840s.²⁵ Recent work on Chartism, as evident in the work of Neil Pye (Chapter Nine), suggests that the Labour aristocracy theory has little relevance with economic, social and political movements such as Chartism. Indeed, entering the contentious debate between Dorothy Thompson and Gareth Stedman Jones, about whether or not the state was powerful enough to deny the Chartist movement space or whether Chartism became effete as the state responded to its objectives, Pye gives a resounding yes to the views of Thompson. In other areas, also, traditional class explanations of conflict have re-emerged, as historians have adapted to the nuanced world of class politics.

The expansion of Labour representation in the first half of the twentieth century can be viewed from many perspectives. It is common to categorise those accounts with reference to ideologies: the Marxist account of inevitable failure of a political solution, a more Trotskyist interpretation of working-class betrayal, alongside more pragmatic interpretations of the scale of achievement. Some of the dividing lines in historiography are summarised well by Christopher Massey in his contribution which focuses on 1945 – 1951. As his contribution goes on to illustrate, whatever the perspective or interpretation, any article on Labour history has to acknowledge that from the outset Labour had to balance the practicalities of representation with discussion of ideology.

Two of the articles in this collection start from points in history that are pivotal. In the space of fifty years Britain twice adapted to the aftermath of dominating and seminal world war. In 1918 preparing for peace included significant change to the franchise. It was to be a catalyst for the development of Labour as a national party. The ad-hoc local organisations that had developed since the inception of the Labour Representation Committee were given a national constitution that built individual party membership from 1918. That membership included women activists. The need to rebuild the nation after war also influenced what was initially local development of welfare. For working-class communities, access to baby clinics and birth control were to change family life forever. Women had a place in the spread of Labour representation at a local level and had an agenda to influence that was of prime interest to them.

Indeed, Anne Baldwin's chapter enhances this research by delving into the history of women councillors in Britain during the inter-war years. There is no national register listing women councillors and Anne has

produced a pioneering study which suggests that whilst women councillors were often few in number, normally less than 10 per cent of the total except in occasional hotspots, yet great in their impact in local government welfare and the development of birth control facilities. Undoubtedly, but inevitably, in the hackneyed adage of the research world, this work is grounds for further research.

The pragmatic approach to providing for the welfare of the nation provides a source for one of the underlying ideological debates that continue to influence the outcomes of Labour representation; how far welfare should be state driven, universal and funded by shared revenue raised through taxes or insurance. The dimension added here is one that is vital to a collection of work focusing on class, culture and community, for in the inter-war years it was municipal socialism at a local level that provided the best opportunities for Labour's achievements for its working-class representation. As the National Health Services (NHS) faces another expansion of privatisation 2012 may prove to be the time when Labour needs to revisit debate about local versus state control to bring about welfare.

At least one commentator suggests that the ideology of a nationalised public service that resulted in the NHS had some critical voices within Labour at the time. Describing the creation of local NHS boards with appointments made by the Minister as "the greatest creation of quangos in British administrative history", Jerry White relates how Herbert Morrison looked upon the movement of LCC hospitals to state control with some sorrow.²⁶ His view is an uncommon one. For most Labour historians the creation of the NHS rightly remains one of the greatest achievements of Labour and yet we seldom consider where it came from, or understand that its creation as a nationalised health service was the product of Nye Bevan's efforts rather than that of William Beveridge or all three main stream political parties: the Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties.

The creation of the NHS and related changes to everyday life resulting from the first majority Labour Government was so significant that 1945 is associated with making the peace as much as ending the war. Yet some historians stress the need to put 1945 in context. Peter Hennessy justifies the extensive and informative coverage of the war in his volume looking at 1945-1951 with the assertion "Postwar Britain cannot be understood at all without a proper appreciation of *the* great formative experience which

shaped it and dominated its economics, its politics and its ethos for at least three decades – the war itself”.²⁷

The achievements of the Attlee governments, first majority Labour governments, in welfare provision are discussed more frequently than the other area of increased national intervention, in industrial policy. On one level the underpinning ideology was clear – nationalisation was the implementation of policy enshrined in the Labour constitution in the shape of Clause Four, requiring “common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange”. The debate as to how far nationalisation provided the best means of common ownership was to come later. What was evident in the years following 1945 however was that any ideology could only be put into place with a series of pragmatic actions. The contextual importance of post-war Britain then becomes evident as priority is given to nationalising those industries that keep Britain moving – mines and transport along with the banks. The symbolism of the struggle to nationalise steel illustrates well how ideology and practical politics intertwine. As Hennessy describes, tons of steel had been turned into ships and guns and wartime control of the industry was acceptable. The 1944 Labour debate on nationalisation recognised the importance of steel and placed it at the centre of plans.²⁸ Decisions on implementation were primarily pragmatic, yet the failure to progress remains one of the platforms on which ideologies are disputed.

If Labour development of welfare and implementation of nationalisation can be seen to have roots in the outcomes of war, then the topic of the third chapter in this section considers how Labour grappled with continuing to keep the peace. The development of an ideological approach around unilateralism introduces one example of the influence of single-issue pressure group politics, that of CND. By taking another look at the issue rather than the organisation, Chris Hill discusses some of the complexities of what happened when ideologies are played out in the public platforms of party conference, meeting both what he terms the “constitutional apparatus of the Labour movement” and the broad spectrum of media interpreted “public opinion”. The result is as much a commentary on the nature of democracy as on the merits of unilateralism and on how the press shaped the conflict between Hugh Gaitskell’s commitment to multilateralism and Frank Cousins’s demand for unilateralism.