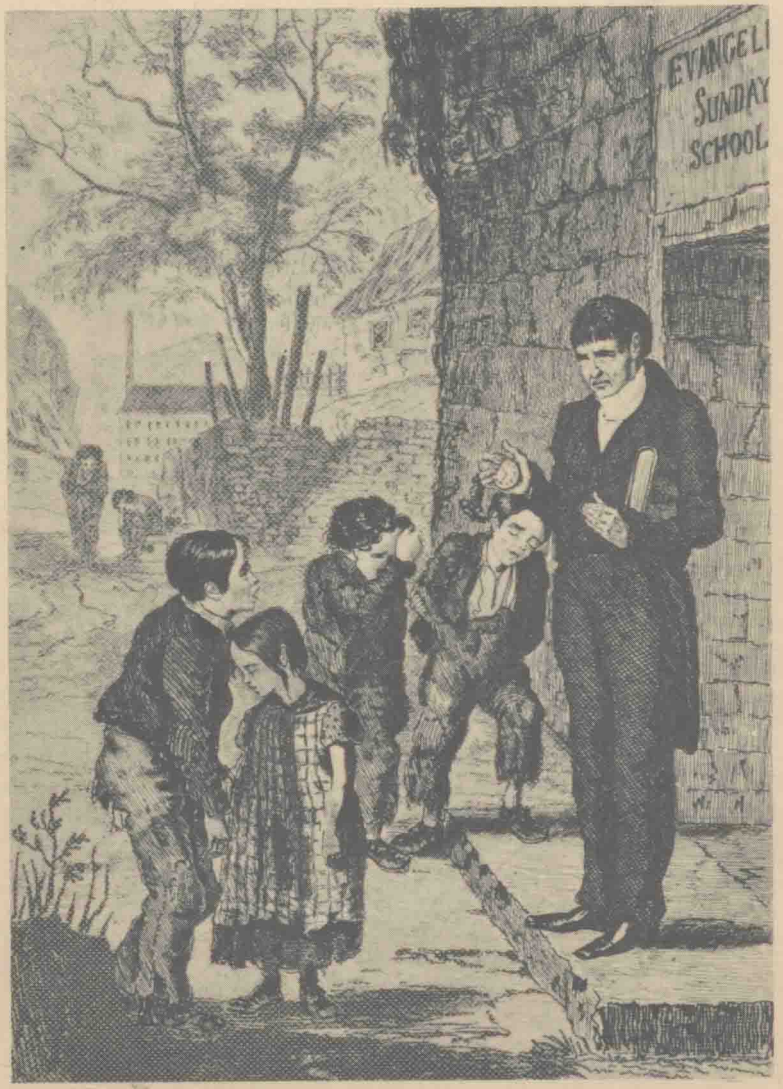
Studies in Economic and Social History

Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution 1780–1850

R J Morris



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Note on References

References in the text within square brackets relate to the items listed alphabetically in sections I and II of the Select Bibliography, followed, where necessary, by the page numbers in italics; for example [R. Williams, 1958: *13*]. Other references in the text, numbered consecutively throughout the book, relate to the Notes and References section.

Editor's Preface

SINCE 1968, when the Economic History Society and Macmillan published the first of the 'Studies in Economic and Social History', the series has established itself as a major teaching tool in universities, colleges and schools, and as a familiar landmark in serious bookshops throughout the country. A great deal of the credit for this must go to the wise leadership of its first editor, Professor M. W. Flinn, who retired at the end of 1977. The books tend to be bigger now than they were originally, and inevitably more expensive; but they have continued to provide information in modest compass at a reasonable price by the standards of modern academic publications.

There is no intention of departing from the principles of the first decade. Each book aims to survey findings and discussion in an important field of economic or social history that has been the subject of recent lively debate. It is meant as an introduction for readers who are not themselves professional researchers but who want to know what the discussion is all about – students, teachers and others generally interested in the subject. The authors, rather than either taking a strongly partisan line or suppressing their own critical faculties, set out the arguments and the problems as fairly as they can, and attempt a critical summary and explanation of them from their own judgement. The discipline now embraces so wide a field in the study of the human past that it would be inappropriate for each book to follow an identical plan, but all volumes will normally contain an extensive descriptive bibliography.

The series is not meant to provide all the answers but to help readers to see the problems clearly enough to form their own conclusions. We shall never agree in history, but the discipline will be well served if we know what we are disagreeing about, and why.

T. C. SMOUT
Editor

University of Edinburgh

1 *Introduction*

THE years between 1780 and 1850 saw fundamental changes in social relationships in Britain which were associated with that acceleration in economic and technological change which historians since Toynbee have called the industrial revolution. The impact of these changes was great enough to create a new vocabulary. 'Industry', 'factory', 'strikes', 'statistics', 'scientist' and 'railway' all came into common use or developed new meanings during that period [R. Williams, 1958: *13*; Hobsbawm, 1962: *17*]. The most important of these innovations was the language of class [Briggs, 1960]. The language of 'ranks' and 'orders' which belonged to the writing of Gregory King, Daniel Defoe, Archdeacon Paley and Edmund Burke recognised social inequality and graded men into a hierarchy which was linked by 'chains' and 'bonds'. The use of this language implied an acceptance of inequality. Paley accepted the existence of these ranks as the will of God. Each rank and station had its own duties and rights. The rich had the right to power and property and the obligation to care for the poor. 'To abolish riches', he wrote, 'would not be to abolish poverty; but on the contrary, to leave it without protection or resource.' After 1780 this language was slowly replaced by the language of class, which first appeared among the philosophers Millar and Gisbourne. By the 1830s and 1840s, in the writings and speeches of Henry Hetherington, Feargus O'Connor, Richard Cobden and John Bright, 'working classes', 'middle classes' and 'aristocracy' had become part of a language which recognised social conflict centred on the clash of interests which arose from the distribution of wealth, income and power. This addition to the language does not imply that social conflict was a new feature of British society. It does suggest that the nature and intensity of conflict was changing, and that the manner in which men thought about that conflict also changed.

In 1832 Dr James Kay, physician to the Ardwick and Ancoats Dispensary, an Edinburgh-trained doctor who had learned his political economy and evangelical religion at the feet of the Scottish divine Thomas Chalmers, looked across a Manchester in

which 874 people out of a population of 142,000 had just died of cholera, and the Reform Bill agitation had aroused hostile middle- and working-class organisations. He wrote:

> 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 unfrequently alarmed, by the wild outbreak of popular violence . . . [Kay, 1832:9].

The radical journalists, like Henry Hetherington, who sought to lead working-class opinion had a very different perspective, but his social landscape was much the same: inequality, especially between labour and capitalists, conflict between them, especially over wages, and a lack of control over the extent of that conflict. It was a long way from the calm certainties of Archdeacon Paley.

What was the nature of the change which Kay perceived? If Marx was right and 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles', then a full account would involve a comprehensive social history of the industrial revolution, perhaps even of western capitalism. Instead we shall select *some* of the major themes in the literature to show ways in which historians have written about class, the evidence they selected, and the concepts and questions they used to interpret that evidence. The aim is not to produce an account of what happened, or even a survey of the literature parcelling it up into schools of thought, lined up in historical debates, but to create an awareness of the choices of evidence, of concepts, of questions, and of values and ideological approaches, which must be made in writing the history of class.

Marx still dominates. Even historians who reject the Marxist answers, like Perkin and Musson, are still attracted by the questions set by Marx, on the importance of social conflict, its relationship to economic change, and to the change in workplace relationships and

living-standards. Hence we begin with a detailed examination of an anti-Marxist (Perkin) and the historical ideas of Marx himself before giving an account of the different models of class structure, and the different focus historians have given to events, institutions and class consciousness. All these are still areas of debate between right- and left-wing historians, as is the relationship of class development with economic change. This discussion, like the literature from which it was derived, continually returns to the themes raised by Marx. The last part of the present book suggests two alternatives for those who wish to escape from the conceptual grip of Marx, neo-Marx and anti-Marx: first the radical development of Marx's ideas in the twentieth century by the Italian Communist Gramsci, and secondly the sociological concepts inspired by Weber, both of which can help our understanding of class in the industrial revolution.

2 *The 'Birth of Class'?*

THE Origins of Modern English Society [Perkin, 1969] has been attacked for its loose formulation of the concept of class, and its claim that class society was created in a short and reasonably well defined period of time in the five years after 1815. (See *Times Literary Supplement*, 17.4.69 and the reply 1.5.69.) Perkin's book is still an excellent starting-point for thinking about the way historians use the concept of class, for that concept was the central organising principle of the book, and was carefully defined at several points in the book, as were the conclusions about social relationships which were derived from its use.

British society before the industrial revolution was according to Perkin 'a classless hierarchy', 'an open aristocracy based on property and patronage' [Perkin, 1969: 17]. There were huge inequalities, a large number of finely graded status rankings, and stable relationships between the ranks. Inequality was accepted because the higher ranks took paternalistic responsibility for the welfare of the poor. Perkin offered two ways of accommodating within the 'classless society' those conflicts which did occur in the eighteenth century over the distribution of wealth and power. 'Class', he said, 'was indeed latent in the 18th century' and was 'ruthlessly suppressed' (pp. 26, 176). He drew a clear contrast: 'Nor was it [eighteenth-century society] like the Victorian, a class society, divided by mutually hostile layers each united by a common source of income . . .' (p. 26); 'A class society is characterized by class feeling, that is by the existence of vertical antagonism between a small number of horizontally integrated groups.' Most eighteenth-century conflicts were 'horizontal antagonism between vertical interest pyramids, each embracing practically the whole range of status levels from top to bottom of society' (p. 176). The mutually hostile layers he defined by their common source of income, namely rent, profit or wages, after the manner of Adam Smith and Ricardo. Perkin then related these sources of income to particular social groups which were then further defined by an 'ideal'. This 'ideal' created within a class, a consciousness of itself, its interests, its conflicts with others, and the

needs, possibilities and aims of organisation. At this point in the book (p. 219), he changed the whole focus of his concept of class from the struggle over the distribution of income to the 'struggle between ideals'. The four ideals were: (i) the aristocratic or paternalistic; (ii) the entrepreneurial middle-class belief in free competition and the virtues of the self-made man against the corruption of aristocratic government; (iii) a weakly formulated working-class ideal based on co-operation and the labour theory of value; and (iv) the professional ideal. Perkin claimed that since the professional men's middle-class incomes were independent of market forces, they were able to develop their own ideal of efficiency and service to the rest of the community. Perkin followed the struggle of ideals, not through the battle for economic power, but through the battle for the control of the state, through parliamentary and administrative reform, the new poor law, education, public health, army and civil service. The end of this was the domination of the entrepreneurial ideal tempered a little by the professional, as the basis of a viable class society.

There are a number of difficulties with this account. The first is the term 'latent'. If it means that class feeling occasionally emerged in the 'form of industrial and political insubordination' and was suppressed, then such 'feeling' could only have arisen from the experience, at some level, of class conflict, and the suppression must have involved one class (a ruling class) acting against another. 'Latent' was essential for the idea of the 'birth of class' for it accommodated eighteenth-century conflicts whilst reserving the concept of class for a specific series of events which then became the 'birth of class'.

By dividing English society into wage, profit and rent takers, Perkin equated a model devised by Adam Smith and Ricardo to explain the distribution of returns to factors of production in an economic system with a model of socio-economic groups to explain the distribution of wealth and power within the social system. Status divisions within classes were recognised by Perkin, but he ignored groups which derived income from a variety of factors of production, such as the land-owning industrialist, the self-employed craftsman, and the profit-seeking cottage-owning shopkeeper common in many towns. The switch of focus from source of income to 'ideal' implied that each ideal could be identified with its equivalent source of income. If individuals or

minority groups deviated from this equivalence, it would not affect claims about the major direction of British society. The assumption cannot be accepted when the bulk of the eighteenth-century aristocracy were profit-seeking, custom-ignoring entrepreneurs, developing and enclosing their agricultural estates, and when a major part of the nineteenth-century middle class sought a paternalistic relationship with the lower classes, not just in the exceptional situation of the factory village, but also through countless charitable organisations.

The switch of focus concentrated attention on the 'struggle of ideals' which resolved into the 'viable class society' of the 1850s. This focus ignored changes in economic and power relationships between social classes through the development of trades-union conflict with employers, the changing use of police and army, the implications of religious and educational activity, and the creation of the banking system of 1844 and the stock exchange for the concentration of finance capital. The importance attributed to increasing scale in human organisation drew attention to the increase in population, the increased size of towns and of workplaces, but drew attention away from changes in the *relationships* of production, the changing market position of labour, and the development of new methods of work discipline. More seriously, this method failed to examine the relationship between the creation of the 'ideals' and the changing social relationships of the industrial revolution.

We must now examine, in the light of evidence of eighteenth-century conflict, the notion of 'the birth of class', with its attendant ideas of 'latent class', 'one-class society' and 'classlessness'.

The power structure of eighteenth-century Britain was dominated by a ruling class of great landowners, a 'federation of country houses', which controlled national government through a subtle mixture of patronage, deference and economic power. The Lowthers in Cumberland and the Lambtons in Durham gained the votes of tradesmen and tenants not so much from the fear of eviction and exclusive dealing but from a natural deference which identified the interests of their landlord with the prosperity and stability of the locality. The whole structure was bound together at national level by a system of bribery, jobs and contracts perfected by the Duke of Newcastle at mid-century. At local level the main institution of their power was the magistrate's bench. Here they supervised the Poor Law, regulated the militia, licensed alehouses,

as well as passed judgement on theft, disorder and damage to property.

An open land market meant that new wealth did not challenge old, but simply bought a landed estate. Thus at the end of the seventeenth century, when the debt-burdened estates of the Duke of Buckingham were sold, the Yorkshire portion was bought by the banking family of Duncombe, and the Burley estate was purchased by Daniel Finch with the fortune which legal and political success had brought his father in Stuart London.[1] Defoe recognised the pattern: 'trade and learning have been the two chief steps by which our gentlemen have raised their relations and built fortunes' (*The Complete English Tradesman*, 1726). At the same time the younger sons of landowners were joining the sons of urban tradesmen and master manufacturers among the merchants and professional men, thus strengthening the social bonds between landed and other forms of economic and social power.

The strength and dominance of this aristocracy, and its ability to maintain its power as well as an open relationship with other ranks in terms of recruitment and patronage, have always impressed historians. Augustan calm has been compared with the 'progress', 'struggle' and 'conflict' of the nineteenth century. Looking forward from the seventeenth century Peter Laslett suggested that England was a 'one-class society', by which he meant that only one class, the aristocracy, was capable of 'concerted action over the whole area of society'. He defined a class as a number of people banded together to exercise collective power, political and economic, and warned that it had been the confusion of status groups (the ranks and orders of King, Paley and the rest) with social class (as he had defined it) which had obscured the one-class nature of society. His use of class was tempting. The aristocracy was the only group provided with an ideology (a mixture of Locke and the settlement of 1688), and its institutions – parliament, the church and the magistrate's bench – were an integrated whole which maintained and justified aristocratic power over the whole of England and Wales and most of Scotland and Ireland. No other group could compete with the extent and effectiveness of this ideological and institutional organisation [Laslett, 1971: *23–54*].

The concept of the 'one-class society' does have serious problems. If class was a relationship of inequality and exploitation then a 'one-class society' was a contradiction in terms, for at least two classes were required for such a relationship to exist. The

contrast between a 'class for itself' and a 'class in itself' (for which see below, p. 24) is more relevant here than the contrast of class and status. Another problem arose from the qualification, 'the whole area of society'. What area did class ideology and organisation have to encompass before class formation could be acknowledged? Could class formation take place in one region? Could class attitudes and loyalties influence a limited range of relationships? If such partial influences are dismissed as not being really a 'class' society, then such a society can hardly be said to exist before the end of the nineteenth century.

How useful is the idea that eighteenth-century society was 'classless', even with Perkin's qualification that class was 'latent'? This recognition of the potential for class development in the inequality and exploitation of the eighteenth-century economy implied that little consciousness of the opposition of interests existed, in contrast to the nineteenth century with its trades unions, Chartism and Anti-Corn Law League. Although the 'classless' eighteenth century is a familiar starting-point for social histories of the industrial revolution, its existence must be questioned first by evidence of several forms of organised opposition to legitimate authority based upon social and economic interest, and designed to promote those interests in accordance with a shared system of values which were the prototype of ideology, and second, by an examination of the language of social conflict in the eighteenth century.

Organised opposition to authority took several forms. The grain riots were the best documented. In times of high prices following poor harvest, the 'law-giving mob' attacked markets, grain carts and flour mills to enforce a popular notion of 'fair prices' which they inherited from the dying paternalistic legislation of the Assize of Bread. Riots against the cider tax and militia levies opposed other forms of ruling-class action. In London, where the crowd had the chance of directly intimidating parliament, they supported Wilkes and the apprenticeship laws of the Spitalfields weavers. Their violence was disciplined and limited to specific targets. It carried the resentment and suspicion of the poor against the rich but never acted to overturn existing social arrangements, only to adjust them in favour of the poor [E. P. Thompson, 1971; Rudé, 1964].

Another potential form of opposition came from the merchant communities of the growing towns. The petitions in support of