CLASS AND COMMUNITY

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN LYNN

ALAN DAWLEY

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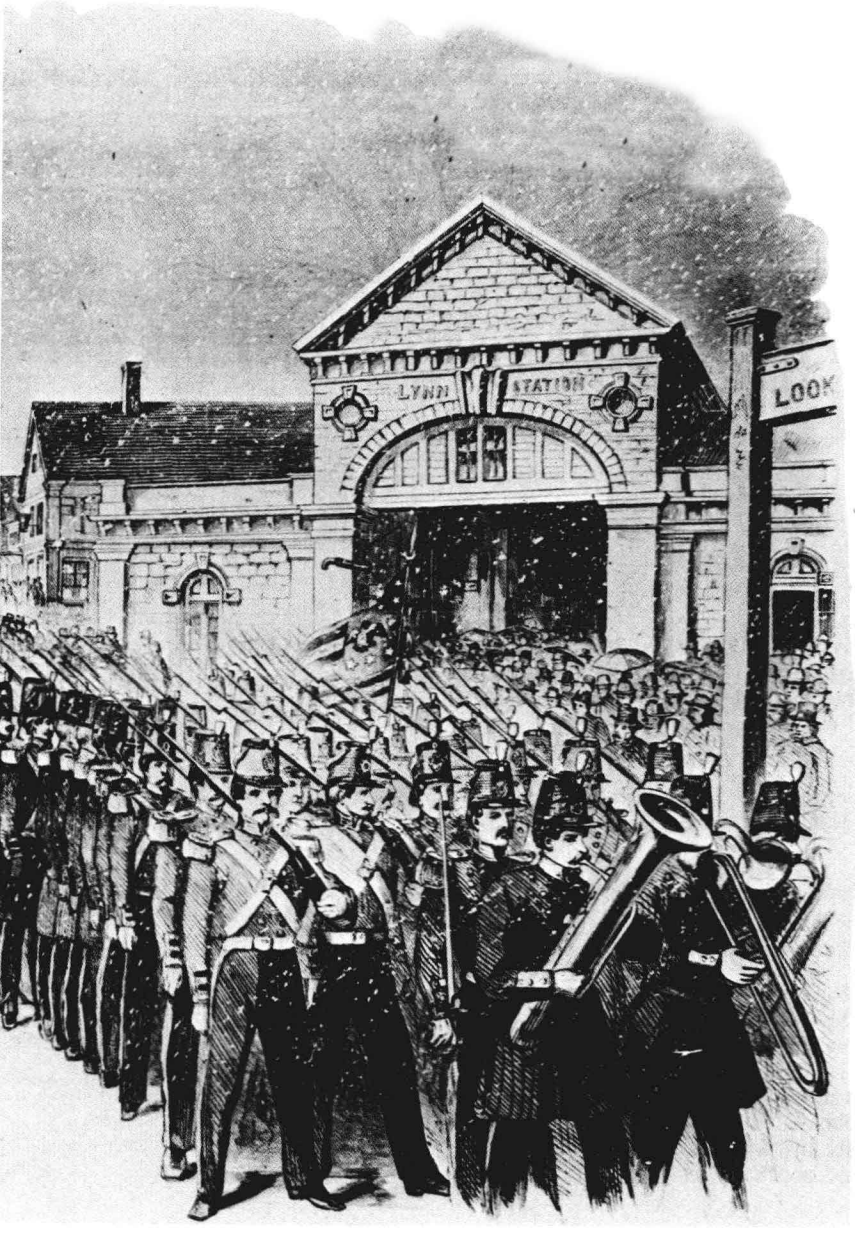

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broadened the scope of my own inquiry. The result that appears here is a truer picture of historical reality than would have emerged if he and I had not hit upon the subject at the same time.

Alan Dawley

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INTRODUCTION
A MICROCOSM OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

This book is about the shoemakers of Lynn, Massachusetts, and their search for social equality. The author has attempted to recapture their world by an effort of the imagination that took him into the homes they lived in, the factories they worked in, and the city streets in which they marched and protested. Like the peoples of all times and places, they yearned for both security and adventure, needed both independence and dependence on others, and tried as best they could to fulfill their images of manhood and womanhood. But they also had a distinctive concern that set them off from people of other eras, a special goal they would have called "equal rights."

They defined equal rights according to their interests in society: a general elevation in the moral and material condition of labor and an equalization of the upper and lower ranks of the social order. This definition also set them apart from others of the same period who pursued their own versions of equality—Women's Rights advocates, Abolitionists, and antimonopoly entrepreneurs. The issue of equality confronted all sectors of American society, and apart from its reactionary opponents—commercial nabobs of the Northeast and planter aristocrats of the Southeast—most groups embraced some form of the idea. Because it was so pervasive, the "Age of Egalitarianism" has become a favorite label among historians; however, the label blots out the vital differences in the definitions of equality and obscures the social conflicts behind the differences. To a frontier planter or farmer, equality meant free access to land. To the rising entrepreneur, it meant open competition in the race for wealth. But to the worker, whose central interests were bound up with wage payments—not

property, ownership, or capital accumulation—equality did not mean an opportunity to win a fortune but a chance to live in comfort and dignity.

To capture the meaning the labor movement imparted to the idea of equality, and to become familiar with the main theme of the chapters to come, we might imagine ourselves in Lynn, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1844 at a meeting of the Journeymen Cordwainer's Society. Apart from resolutions, speechmaking, and votes, there is musical entertainment, and one song seems to have a special appeal to the audience:

> Now EQUAL RIGHTS the motto,
> *Wax* your *threads* as true *souls* ought to;
> Though the run-*round* bosses *bristle,*
> We'll raise a *peg* and let them *whistle.*
> *Stick* to the *last,* brave cordwainers!
> In the *end* you'll *awl* be gainers![1]

Such rollicking evening entertainment in the mold of music hall comedy was good for their souls because it lightened the drudgery of the day's toil and enlivened their complaints about the boss. With hearts warmed and spirits uplifted, cordwainers left the meeting feeling that manual laborers were the true lords of creation and the equals of any person on earth.

A person who feels this way is not likely to take economic oppressions or offences to dignity lying down, and, accordingly, when shoemakers were subjected to several years of unrelieved hardship in the 1850s, they responded by organizing the greatest strike in American history before the Civil War. During the strike of 1860 a Lynn poet wrote the "Cordwainers' Song," calling upon strikers to "stand for your rights" in the face of police and militia mobilized to break their spirit.

> The workman is worthy his hire,
> No tyrant shall hold us in thrall;
> They may order their soldiers to fire,
> But we'll stick to the hammer and awl.[2]

Only fiercely independent individuals would defy authority in this manner, daring would-be tyrants to make them into martyrs. A third

of the strikers were women, indicating that resistance to tyranny and the willingness to risk martyrdom were not male virtues alone.

The tradition of Equal Rights passed over the great historical divides of the century—Civil War and Industrial Revolution—and arrived intact in the Gilded Age. The folkways of antebellum, preindustrial communities survived long enough to give birth to new versions of the old refrain, as in this anthem of high-spirited defiance popular in the 1880s:

> Storm the fort, ye Knights of Labor,
> Battle for your cause;
> Equal rights to every neighbor,
> Down with tyrant laws.[3]

In the half-dozen decades before the twisting passageways of time absorbed the last echoes of this refrain, Equal Rights had become a powerful mode of action and belief. Each new generation between 1830 and 1890 recreated the legacy of the previous generation, making the past available to the future in a cohesive form, and thereby transforming the everyday experience of "one damn thing after another" into a living historical tradition.

However, history does not afford the luxury of writing about equality as if *in*equality did not exist. It may be reasonable to argue that the average white man had it better in preindustrial America than in Europe, but to conclude that the American social order was, therefore, egalitarian is to engage in the kind of self-serving myth-making that privileged interests habitually perform. Myths about equality have always overblown its true extent and have always overlooked the larger context of inequality. But the context is just as important: white workingmen won equal political rights by assuming the position of a privileged caste vis-à-vis black workingmen; the pioneer's frontier of free land was the Indian's virtual extinction; the businessman's equality of opportunity for success was the misfortune of failure for his fallen competitors; the factory owner's grand estate was the misery of the operatives. In this setting, shoemakers' songs about equality were but the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen.

If inequality is taken seriously, then a class analysis of its causal

foundations also merits serious consideration. Because of the intimate connection between class analysis and political radicalism, it has not always been possible, and apparently in certain circles will never be possible, to get an open hearing on this method of inquiry. Unfortunately, each generation of American scholars has to waste considerable energy working its way back to the points of valid insight originally propounded by Marx, when they should be standing on those insights as vantage points from which to view other matters. In the last decade, the pathway to the vantage points has been widened considerably by the work of such scholars as William A. Williams, C. Wright Mills, Eugene Genovese, Barrington Moore, and David Montgomery.[4]

The concept of class is the analytical foundation of the present work. It appears in the following pages in the form of basic questions about the nature of social relations in the Industrial Revolution. Who owns what? Who is in charge of production? Who receives the fruits of industrialization? What are the links between economic and political power? What is the interplay between cultural values and the social hierarchy? These questions assume an underlying unity in the study of economics, politics, society, and culture, an assumption of considerable utility to the study of industrialization, because its character was revolutionary and its origin lay in the simultaneous occurrence of sweeping changes in all spheres of life.

If it is to be effective, class analysis must provide an accurate explanatory framework for subduing the chaos of individual experience and making it intelligible as the social experience of groups of people over time. As E. P. Thompson reminds us, if we stop history at any particular moment, there is no social context at all, only a multitude of unconnected individuals. But as soon as individuals acquire a past and a future, it becomes clear from the recurrent patterns in their relationships that they interact through group processes.[5] Therefore, a strong attraction of class analysis is its capacity to encompass such a rich variety of materials from such a broad range of human experiences—social, economic, political, and cultural. If the various materials are thought of as the flakes of brightly colored stone in the barrel of a kaleidoscope, then class relations are the mirrors that impart patterns to the stone flakes. The task of the

researcher is to joint the kaliedoscope at the light and gaze at the brilliant display within.

No event in history has had a more massive impact than the Industrial Revolution. Like the upward thrust of a mountain range, it formed a great continental divide across the streams of history, causing the past and the future to flow away from one another down the opposite slopes. In the process, existing class systems (master/slave) were cut off from the future, and new class systems (wage worker/industrial capitalist) emerged from the steep slopes of the peaks that faced forward. Old forms of inequality (master and servant) were destroyed, and new forms (employer and employee) were created. Old institutions, like the producer's household and the guilds, were eliminated as the new institutions of factory and trade union took their places. The sexes came into new relations as women left the hearthside to take jobs outside the home. New communities were founded which gathered together people from all parts of the globe.

To explore these generalizations about the Industrial Revolution at close range, one must take up the study of particular industries. For economists, sociologists, and historians interested in the factory system, the textile industry has often served this purpose, and other investigations are yet to be made of such industries as garment making, meat-packing, farm implements, and iron fabrication that converted from household to factory organization.[6] The present work focuses on the shoe industry, a field well suited to serve as a case study of the industrialization process, because its history during the century and a half after 1750 reproduced on a smaller scale the major developments of the Industrial Revolution. Originally an artisan occupation carried on in a multitude of single households, shoemaking became increasingly oriented toward the impersonal marketplace in the late eighteenth century as merchants arranged to have ever larger lots of shoes made for wholesale trade. Beginning in the second decade of the nineteenth century, merchants embarked on a course that would transform them into manufacturers and would replace merchant capitalism with industrial capitalism. The climax of this transformation was the shoe factory, which came to the industry during the Civil War. The reader will find these events related in detail in the chapters on "Entrepreneurs" and "Factories."

Because the shoe industry was a model of industrialization, it attracted the attention of an important American economist and dean of labor studies in this country, John Commons, a seminal scholar who was to labor history what Frederick Jackson Turner was to the history of the farmer. Through a multivolume history, another multivolume compendium of documents, and the writings of his students, Commons dominated the field for almost a half century. He worked out many of his major themes in a long article published in 1906, and still influential today, which described a series of evolutionary stages in the development of the shoe industry in the United States.[7] The enduring contribution of the article was its convincing demonstration that capitalism had thoroughly undermined the position of the skilled artisan several decades before the factory system. For other matters, however, it can no longer be taken as a useful point of departure. Commons' contention that the labor movement in the industry was a hopeless rearguard action of nonfactory workers trying to fend off the effects of industrialization will not stand the test of quantitative analysis. As will be shown in the chapters on "Workers" and "Militants," most of the men and women who organized the Knights and Daughters of St. Crispin were modern industrial workers fighting for both social reform and improved wages and conditions.

More than a purely economic institution, the factory had a decisive impact on the overall shape of class relations in industrial society. The equations of class power were written into the deeds that conferred proprietary rights on the owner and gave the wage earner nothing but the right to sell his labor at the prevailing rate. Both owner and worker, of course, enjoyed freedom of contract, but one told the other when to start and stop work, when to eat his lunch, and when he was out of a job, leaving little doubt about who enjoyed more freedom after the contract was made. When the owner entered the factory he heard the busy hum of machinery, saw the swift, smooth flow of production, and felt a satisfaction akin to a magistrate in a well-regulated commonwealth. When the worker entered, he braced himself against mayhem, heard the cacophony of clattering machinery, saw only the same small segments of the finished product he had seen the day before, and felt a sense of order akin to a man being put behind bars.

When owner and worker left the factory in the evening, one walked home to a bungalow or boardinghouse, while the other climbed into a horsecarriage to be driven to his fine stone house in another part of town. One had a neighbor who had a niece who worked as a chambermaid in the home of the other. One sat down to a supper of cornbread and fish soup, while the other dined on roast lamb, rare wine, and rich pastries. One pinched pennies when he made rare purchases of clothing or home furnishings, while the other pinched five-hundred-dollar notes from the bank. Since both lived in a society where money talked, the one who had a tenth or a twentieth of the other's income talked softer and lived at a level so far below the other's that he could scarcely afford to buy the very shoes he manufactured. The unequal distribution of income, a fact resulting not from supply and demand but ultimately from the difference between owners and nonowners, assured both parties that the effects of class would follow them home at night. This subject is pursued in the chapter on "The Poor and the Less Poor."

The fact of unequal income is obvious to observers of living standards in nineteenth-century cities. Much more difficult to trace are the twisting paths that led from the factory to the cultural values, political opinions, and the organizational activities of these two classes. Just because wage earners and their employers stood firmly opposed to one another on certain ethical questions and perceived a fundamental conflict of interest in the wage bargain, it does not mean the two groups never voted for the same candidates and always regarded each other as enemies. How best to explore these pathways from the workplace to other parts of the community is a problem in itself. The study of an entire industry might lead to an overemphasis on purely economic matters, while studies of one group, one event, or one period of history present obvious limitations for someone concerned to discover the broad interrelations among groups, events, and historical epochs. One highly suitable solution is a community study. The method of community studies was developed by field researchers in anthropology and sociology and has been applied successfully by historians often enough to warrant continued attention. To be successful a community study must avoid an antiquarian preoccupation with purely local details and must strive in-

stead to establish a larger context that, in the words of Herbert Gutman, "permits the careful examination of grand and sweeping hypotheses."[8]

The community chosen to be the subject of this investigation is Lynn, Massachusetts. Because it was once a slow-paced, agricultural village nestled along the New England coastline, and because it went through a dynamic period of growth and transformation that made it a factory city, Lynn was an ideal representative of the larger shift in America from an agricultural to an industrial way of life. Moreover, Lynn's part in revolutionizing the production of shoes was crucial: it was the first to manufacture large numbers of wholesale shoes, was usually ahead of its nearest rival, Philadelphia, as the world's largest producer of ladies shoes, and was the first to adopt the sewing machine and the factory system on a large scale. Lynn was, of course, unique as any community is unique, and it was unusual as any leader is unusual, but because it was the leader in one of the leading industries in the United States, it exemplified the larger processes of American economic development. It was, in short, a microcosm of the Industrial Revolution.

Throughout most of its history, Lynn was a burning coal of discontent. Although most of its fire is gone today—having been smothered by the decline of the shoe industry, the long-term depression common to the mill towns of New England, and the city's gradual absorption into the Boston metropolis—it was once the home of hosts of uplifters and reformers, including Quaker and Methodist dissenters, Garrisonian abolitionists (indeed, Garrison himself was briefly a resident cordwainer), temperance advocates, Free Soil organizers, militant electrical workers, and five generations of protesting shoeworkers. In the nineteenth century the community was notorious as a hotbed of radicalism. Observers agreed, whether friendly or not, "There is within its limits more radicalism, more genuine, unadulterated, red republicanism than could be found in any other place of the same size in our Commonwealth."[9]

Frederick Douglass thought the reputation well deserved. At a time when the railroads of the nation operated segregated passenger cars, Douglass, who lived in Lynn for a time, bought a first-class ticket in the Lynn depot and took a seat in the car reserved for

whites. When the conductors came to eject him, Douglass held tight to his seat, and in the ensuing scuffle, the seat, along with two or three others, was torn away from its mountings. For this show of strength against racism, the railroad management decreed that trains would no longer stop in Lynn. However, as Douglass fondly recalled, "the people of Lynn stood bravely by me and denounced the railroad management in emphatic terms."[10] Eventually, the trains resumed their normal schedule, and Douglass had his way.

This same uncompromising temper infused all segments of the community and all ranks in its leading industry. Whatever the cause shoemakers, manufacturers, or shopkeepers pursued, they were sure to do it with great ardor, issuing vehement manifestoes against the status quo. This prompted one action-minded abolitionist to conclude that "radicalism went with the smell of leather."[11] But there was a point in the meaning of the term "radicalism" beyond which certain members of the community could not go. As the men with capital to invest took full command of production and took the lion's share of the bounty of distribution, they became bulwarks of the new status quo themselves. A shoe manufacturer could be radical on the question of slavery, but could scarcely be radical on questions of the rights of ownership, unionism, the use of police in strikes, or the distribution of wealth. Thus in the course of the Industrial Revolution, radicalism came to mean democratic opposition to the pervasive inequalities resulting from industrial capitalism, and it passed into the hands of the labor movement.

This brings us back to Equal Rights. Among the men and women who stitched and sewed leather or cloth, cut and shaped stone, poured and molded iron, or sawed and chiseled wood, nothing was more sacred than the principle, "He who does not work, neither shall he eat." This first axiom of labor actually had two possible interpretations. It could mean simply that anybody who put in some time on the job was entitled to receive at least a living wage, never mind the fact that a few owners and managers received stupendous incomes. But it also implied the more radical meaning that anyone who lived well off the labor of others who lived poorly was a vile social parasite whose privileged status derived not from moral right but from economic might. According to the tenets of Equal Rights, this was

monopoly, whether it was supported by a public charter of incorporation from the state or not. And if those who labored with hands, backs, and brains wished to break the power of monopoly, they had to organize economically and politically. (Accounts of efforts along these lines follow in the chapters on "Artisans," "Militants," and "Politicians.") But at this point a trap was sprung on Equal Rights: seeking a way out through fair wages and honest elections, it found itself boxed in. Instead of opposing the status quo, it became its captive. Therefore, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, workers who saw pure-and-simple trade unions and the two main political parties as blind alleys reassessed their position. They decided to slough off the philosophy of Equal Rights and turned instead to socialism, the brand of radicalism most relevant to industrial society.