FROM WORKING-CLASS TO UNDERCLASS: THE RISE AND FALL OF INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM IN SOUTH YORKSHIRE

DE CLASE TRABAJADORA A CLASES BAJAS: EL AUGE Y CAÍDA DEL CAPITALISMO INDUSTRIAL EN YORKSHIRE DEL SUR

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ABSTRACT:

South Yorkshire has been a cauldron of 'working-class politics' for more than 150 years, reflecting deep changes in the social and economic fortunes of the British proletariat. There is a distinct circularity of experience between early industrial workers in Sheffield and Rotherham and the modern generation of zero-hours workers: since the 1980s, a more naked form of capitalism has reasserted itself, revealing the 'post-war consensus' to be a fleeting and incomplete phenomenon. This article will seek to probe the reasons for and political alternatives to the 'long arc' of the South Yorkshire working-class, from precariously employed day labourers to settled working-class and back again.

Key words: working-class - development - neoliberalism - social-democracy - trade unionism.

RESUMEN:

South Yorkshire ha sido caldo de cultivo para la "acción política de la clase trabajadora" por mas de 150 años, reflejando cambios profundos en la suerte tanto económica como social, que ha experimentado el proletariado británico. Existe una experiencia circular distintiva entre los trabajadores de la época industrial temprana de Sheffield y Rotherham, y los trabajadores de la generación moderna de las «cero-horas»: desde la década de 1980, una forma de capitalismo mas desnuda se ha reafirmado, revelando que el «consenso de la post-guerra» fue un fenómeno fugaz e incompleto. Este artículo buscará demostrar las razones y posibles alternativas al «largo arco» que la clase trabajadora de South Yorkshire ha experimentado, desde jornaleros precariamente contratados pasando por una clase trabajadora establecida y terminando nuevamente de vuelta a su precarización.

Palabras clave: clase trabajadora - desarrollo - neoliberalismo - socialdemocracia - sindicalismo.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 2014 round of local elections, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won ten of the twenty-one council positions up for election in that cycle. Labour MP for the Rotherham area John Healey said 'This is a message or a warning if you like, to all mainstream parties - a challenge to us all because people are angry.' ("UKIP Makes Major Gains", 2014) When observing the pattern of disasters which have befallen working-class residents of Rotherham for the past half-century, this anger is completely understandable: the decimation of local industry during the Thatcher era, an inactive and complacent Labour council for the 1990s and 2000s, and serious social disintegration since the financial crisis of 2008. Far from the aspirational society which grew in South Yorkshire in the 1960s and 1970s, there is little hope of improvement in the foreseeable future, with the UK's national economy flatlining, and social policies resembling those at the close of the nineteenth century being enforced by a Conservative-Liberal government.

This harking-back to the dark days of industrial capitalism is more than coincidental or symptomatic of any particular political party. Whilst at first the victory of a far-right organisation in the heartland of British trade unionism might seem bewildering, by analysing the patterns of working-class politics in the long term, we can see why UKIP have been so successful: they fill a vacuum created by the forcible destruction of South Yorkshire's labour movement and the Labour Party's dereliction of its duty to working-class communities.

The aim of this investigation is to draw out a narrative thread which runs throughout the 'long twentieth-century': that of insecurity, poverty, precarious employment, exclusion and fragmentation. I will demonstrate that these conditions were mitigated and marginalised by the working-class movement, and its expression in 'working-class politics'. Furthermore, I will conclude by demonstrating that now that the fleeting social moment in which the demands of the working-class movement were partially institutionalised has passed, an ascendant capitalist class is doing its best to restore the conditions which existed in Britain's industrial past for its own betterment. In short, the social-democratic experiment lasting from 1945 to 1979 was not 'the new normal' of prosperity, aspiration and consumer capitalism, it was an historical anomaly, resulting in abnormally high standards of living and an abnormally extensive collection of institutions which partially internalised the interests of workers. This revelation presents us with urgent political conclusions about the post-Financial Crisis world in which we live.

This paper is split into four parts. Firstly, Part I shall analyse the particular social and political conditions which predominated in South Yorkshire before the Second World War. Secondly, Part II shall analyse the specific reasons for the social and political settlement known as the 'post-war consensus'. Next, Part III will examine how the post-war consensus was dismantled, and the material consequences for workers in the region. Finally, Part IV will examine the contemporary situation, drawing para-

llels with the past experiences of working-class people, and will attempt to suggest some necessary avenues of future praxis.

2. LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1. Class and its malcontents

Class, as an object of political investigation, has long been viewed with deep suspicion by both the academic and political mainstreams throughout the latter half of the 'long twentieth-century' in which capitalist relations dominated British society. This has not always the case: often, those with socio-economic power acknowledged material and social inequality and attempted to justify it through various means: a perfect example is the stern Christianity evidenced in Cecil Frances Alexander's (1871, p. 27) lyrics of the traditional English hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, published in 1848. She appeals to religious order as a justification for a class society defined by rigid relations of individuals to the means of production:

> The rich man in his castle,
> The poor man at his gate,
> God made them high and lowly,
> And ordered their estate.

In the second half of the 'long twentieth-century' a miasma of denial descended, closely associated with neoliberal discourses surrounding the individual. Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Prime Minister from 1979-1991, famously proclaimed 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first' (Keay, 1987). Concurrently with the advent of neoliberalism, and the shift in social power away from organised labour, which I shall explore more fully in Part III, contemporary scholarship developed an almost allergic aversion to discussions of class. Trenchant criticisms of class as a means for understanding the cleavages and inequalities in modern society amounted to what has become known as the 'linguistic turn': the belief emerged in academia during the crisis of social-democracy in the 1970s and 1980s that traditional empirical measures of societies were now irrelevant within a globalised world. In what purported to be the death knell for class analyses, Pakulski and Waters (1999, p. 444) in *The Death of Class* felt confident enough to declare that any serious analysis of class is now 'hopelessly anachronistic'. This aversion to class is not confined to the political mainstream. For example, Ellen Meiksins Wood (1999) charts a cross-disciplinary shift away from socio-economic analyses towards discourse-based explorations of political and historical phenomena, which, whilst retaining a patina of 'neo-Gramscian' radicalism, often reach descriptive conclusions or those which unthinkingly mirror the interests of powerful state elites. This paper seeks to rescue class analysis both from its vulgar

'Marxist' caricaturists, and its critics in the political mainstream who seek to censor content which contradicts their direct material interests.

South Yorkshire has always been at the cutting edge of 'working-class politics'. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* marks a vital watershed in popular engagement with politics, and the start of serious analysis of the relationship between modern governors and the governed of contemporary Europe. Without Paine's treatises in which the aspirations of revolutionaries were sharpened into a degree of political coherence which had been hitherto elusive, later political writers would have been utterly foundationless. Paine pulled no punches when damning the rulers of late 18th-century Europe: 'the idea of hereditary legislators is as inconsistent… and as absurd as an hereditary mathematician' (Paine, 1945, p. 289). This text was wildly popular, selling more than 50,000 copies within two months of its publication, and was 'eagerly read by … the skilled factory-hands of the new industrial north' (Rudé, 1964, p. 183). Whilst writing these words, Paine was living in Masbrough, Rotherham, designing a state-of-the-art iron bridge for the Walker's ironworks in 1789 and 1790, his presence having an electric effect on the burgeoning political culture of South Yorkshire's radical artisans at the crux of European revolution.[1]

From the earliest forms of capital in South Yorkshire, it appears that there has been a most fundamental link between the specific processes of industrial development and the kind of political expressions to which they gave rise – and it seems that the claims of exceptionalism made by anti-class theorists about neoliberal society, that 'everything is different now', cannot hold true.

2.2. Class, in the abstract

Class, fundamentally, is not a *thing* but a *relationship*; classes with differing relationships to the production of the social surplus have struggled for control over that surplus. It is no coincidence that in the first words of the Communist Manifesto, Marx lists *pairs* of classes: it is impossible to imagine a ruling class without a working class, an oppressor without the oppressed (Marx & Engels, 2008, p. 3). It is vital we understand class as a relationship since it is a dialectic process, subject to continual evolution through contestation – Marx's famous quote, taken from the opening lines of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, outlines the dialectic of class, interacting and being interacted with by other classes and the material environment:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx, 1852, Ch. 1)

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1   Karl Marx 's one and only interaction with Sheffield was soured by intellectual prickliness – he wrote a series of articles for a Chartist newspaper, the Sheffield Free Press. These were said by the politically erratic editor Isaac Ironsides to be so long as to be 'entombing the newspaper'; Marx, upon hearing this, and that his fees were to be withheld, damned the newspaper's editorship as 'Calibans'. (Price, 2011, p. 51).

It is this abstraction, with its focus on the underlying relationships of capital, that allows us to draw together a coherent lineage of working-class culture through the 'long twentieth-century' of capitalism in South Yorkshire. Though the *form* of oppression of working-class people has altered radically across the past 150 years, underlying economic and political *structures* integral to capitalist accumulation provide continuity.

Thompson rightly attacks writers of all shades, including 'Marxist' writers, in heavily emphasised quotation marks, who presume that class is nothing more than a mathematically deduced position in society, working-class culture being written off as either an 'unjustified disturbance-symptom' upsetting the order of society, or as a nuisance-ridden superstructure which breeds 'false' consciousness (Thompson, 2013, pp. 9-10). Clearly such frameworks are revealed as mechanistic and instrumentalist when faced with the contradictory, diverse and fragmented experiences of the real people who constitute and have constituted South Yorkshire's working-class. His stated aim of 'seeking to rescue the obsolete hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan... from the enormous condescension of history' (Thompson, 2013, p. 12) is not some antiquarian project to catalogue the curios of the past, but an exercise in understanding living history. It is only in this focus on the agents of history, working men and women, that Thompson demonstrates how we can grapple with updating Georg Lukacs's (1967, Ch. 4:iii) concept of man as the 'subject-object' of history into the twenty-first century — is human political activity still inextricably interlinked with the dialectical process of capitalist development, and does working-class politics, therefore, still matter?

2.3. Working-Class Politics

Understanding specifically *working-class* politics cannot be done without a much more complex view of the interplay between experiences of privation and insecurity, and wider social and cultural contexts through which those material experiences are filtered. For the purposes of this paper, working-class politics will be defined broadly as the political ideas and institutions emerging from the interplay of three dialectically interrelated areas:

a) Direct lived experiences of working-class people — wages, job security, working conditions, housing, social support, etc.

b) The dominant political ideas within society — prosperity/depression, individualism/collectivism, nationalism/internationalism, etc.

c) Cultural narratives which predominate — community decline, loss of identity, self-improvement etc.

It should be obvious that such a definition does not condemn as irrelevant or 'false consciousness' those organisations whose aims, policies and actions are hugely detrimental to working-class interests. To do so would obscure an uncomfortable truth —

that the 'politics of despair' are often driven by precisely the same processes which drove the Labour Party's predominance in South Yorkshire. Nowhere is this more starkly illustrated than in Rotherham since 2008.

For a wider understanding of working-class politics we have to move beyond Marx's comparatively limited writings to later writers – one who sheds light on this area is Antonio Gramsci. His writing on hegemony is highly lucid and relevant. For sake of brevity, in-depth analyses of Gramsci's writing can be found elsewhere (Lockett, 2014), but in brief, Gramsci highlights the *construction* of political consensuses – that political settlements come to fruition within a shifting historical and material context, and are constantly subject to the conflictual interaction of classes who possess vastly unequal resources of political and social power.

So how can we operationalise the intellectual avenues of inquiry set out above? Jose Harris thinks that 'traditional historians have probably been right in seeking the collective history of the "working class" in formal institutions such as trade unions and co-operatives rather than in the experience of the shop-floor' (Harris, 1993, p. 148). But Thompson demonstrates conclusively, as we have seen, that analyses of the working-class cannot ignore the lives led by the constituents of that class. Thus, we have to choose the metrics and proxies most relevant to working-class politics and working-class life in order to draw a cohesive macroeconomic narrative. The body of this paper will focus mainly on three overlapping and intertwining areas across the period:

1) The 'shop-floor' – living conditions, job security, working conditions.

2) Organised labour – trade union history, unity and disunity, efficacy in securing interests of members, etc.

3) Formal politics – political parties, local democracy, relationship to local unions, working-class engagement/disengagement.

With these in mind, this paper will set out to demonstrate that throughout the period in question, working-class politics has informed political currents in South Yorkshire in roughly three period: firstly, before 1945, industrial capitalism led to an increasingly militant union movement which was channelled into the fledgling Labour Party; secondly, during the Second World War a political settlement was reached between capital and labour which cemented some significant gains for working-class people in South Yorkshire; and finally that a cross-party neo-liberal counterrevolution, typified most violently by the Miners' Strike 1984-5, subsequently returned capitalist development and working-class life in the region to type, seeing the stripping of a temporary, incomplete and exclusive social-democracy by force.

3. SOUTH YORKSHIRE FROM THE SECOND INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

3.1. The Working Masses

Whilst lodging in an attic in Scotland Street, central Sheffield in 1887, Sheffield resident, early anarchist and naturalist Edward Carpenter wrote:

> In the early morning there was the strident sound of the 'hummers' and the clattering of innumerable clogs of men and girls going to work and on till late at night there were drunken cries and shouting. Far around stretched nothing but factory chimneys and foul courts inhabited by the wretched workers. It was, I must say, frightfully depressing. (Carpenter, 1916, pp. 135-6)

This is but one isolated account of the reality of industrial life picked from the countless observations of social commentators, documentarians, philanthropists, agitators, and the comparatively rare accounts of workers themselves. The last quarter of the nineteenth-century until the First World War, known amongst historians as the Second Industrial Revolution (Lloyd-Jones & Lewis, 1994), is the first point on our chart of the long arc of working-class life in South Yorkshire. According to historical orthodoxy it marked the point at which technological innovation unleashed the full productivity of modern capitalism for the betterment of all — as the coiner of the phrase Peter Geddes put it in 1915, the 'neotechnic' had finally vanquished the 'paleotechnic' (Geddes, 1915, Ch. 4). However, if we examine the actual processes of development in South Yorkshire, we see that a much more piecemeal and contested picture emerges, often contingent on individual labour disputes and underhand competition between capitalists.

Though coal and minerals had supported inhabitation going back into humanity's most distant past (Coates, 1975), by 1891 the soon-to-be-City of Sheffield had grown to 388,089 inhabitants, almost a 1000% increase in size since the start of the century (Sheffield City Council, 2011). Much of rural South Yorkshire was mined for the plentiful supplies of coal, and conditions down pits were little better, and just as dangerous, as they had been when the first pits were sunk in the eighteenth century — even Frank Machin, in his exhaustive account of early South Yorkshire pits, felt that 'it is not necessary to repeat the oft told story of the children employed underground' (Machin, 1958, p. 4). The vast majority of miners lived in near-abject poverty in rural areas of South Yorkshire in close-knit mining communities such as Dinnington and Mexborough which retained their unique social structure until the pit closures of the 1980s - managerial abuse was rife, and labour relations were rarely harmonious, though disputes were often highly local and fragmented due to the boggling array of industrial complexities found in mining[2].

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2   Managerial safety certification was only introduced in 1872; even by 1911 its application was haphazard and incomplete. (Machin, 1958, p. 12).

Industrial workers, flocking to urban centres from poor rural areas where employment was seasonal and at the mercy of the weather, fared little better. Though Sheffield's historically loose and diffuse formal administrative arrangements may have been an important factor in the strength of the early working-class movement there (Price, 2011, pp. 3-4), it was disastrous for public health – meaning no centralisation of sanitation á la Joseph Chamberlain's tenure as Mayor of Birmingham was possible for decades. Mortality, according to contemporary surgeon John Taylor, was significantly higher than similar cities, with nearly a thousand deaths from 'zymotic' diseases per year – these included smallpox, measles, scarlet fever, diphtheria, whooping cough and diarrhoea (Taylor, 1873, p. 9).

Working conditions were similarly dire. Though mainstream commentators such as Geddes provide us with images of the emergence of an entirely new industrial society emerging fully born in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, industrial development in South Yorkshire was conflictual and slow at best. The antagonistic and divisive 'butty' system, involving multiple layers of subcontraction, remained the commonest form of employment in Sheffield's iron workshops and in new steel-producing establishments using Bessemer's new refinement techniques, the number of large factories remaining very small (Docherty, 1983, pp. 32-5). Without even the minimal Labour Exchanges of the 1910s onwards, employment was haphazardly dependent on personal connections and patronage. Workers seeking education or healthcare had to depend on middle-class and bourgeois philanthropic concerns such as the early Settlement movement, which often came heavily loaded with patriarchal overtones (Price, 2011, Ch. 8). Gaskell also provides us with a fascinating insight into the ineptitude with which Sheffield City Council attempted to deal with the unimaginable squalor of urban conditions, borne to a significant degree out of simple lack of motivation (Gaskell, 1975).

3.2. The Cradle of Mass Industrial Unionism

South Yorkshire has a long and colourful tradition of working-class radicalism stretching back well into the eighteenth century, closely bound up with the artisanal forms of industry which predominated into the twentieth century. During the Jacobin Revolution in France, Sheffield became a hotbet of intrigue and unrest, which beyond doubt involved significant layers of both craftsmen and manual labourers – the poetry and ballads of radical file-cutter and alehouse regular Joseph Mather gives us a vivid insight into the independence and pugnacity natural to this class of skilled craftsmen (Mather, 1862).

Since the formal legalisation of combination of men in 1824, there can be little doubt that the form of trade unionism which prevailed was a reflection of the bewilderingly complex and contradictory development of industry in South Yorkshire. Due to the closeness of workers and the exclusivity of skills inherent within the micro-production in Sheffield's skilled workshops, the structure of Sheffield's early unions allowed them to assume 'not only the ordinary industrial functions of a trade

union but also a host of social and political functions [as well as] an extensive share in the control of its industry as a whole' (Pollard, 1959, p. 65). Yet this position of organised labour can be highly exaggerated – even amongst skilled metalworking trades, density, efficacy and longevity of union activity varied significantly, with various trades and unions fluctuating in strength with often serious breaks in continuity when market conditions were particularly tough, or particularly prosperous (Pollard, 1959, pp. 75-77). Whilst it is spurious to suggest that early trades unions were focused entirely on the maintenance of privilege for a labour aristocracy, it is clear that trades had little unifying direction or organisation, and had glaring holes in their coverage – Sidney Pollard adds as an unforgivably brief afterthought that almost all female workers in Sheffield trades before the 1890s were unorganised (Pollard, 1959, p. 77). But this illustrates one of our key themes running throughout this paper – that all social settlements between the working-class and the property-owning elite in South Yorkshire in the nature of the bargain excluded sections of the population from protection and inclusion. These are almost invariably the least visible, and the least secure – in the nineteenth century these were women, the poor, and the unorganised.

The eclipse of iron by steel began to transform industrial relations across South Yorkshire, and indeed across Britain. By the 1890s, the now-outdated techniques of Bessemer were gradually replaced by open-hearth steelmaking – the heavy, capital-intensive Bessemer plants having little drive to convert production to the new and better techniques, countless small firms had sprung up (Lloyd-Jones & Lewis, 1998, p. 93). As demand for steel skyrocketed, these firms became the cradle of new mass industrial unions, which quickly eradicated the 'butty' system by the early 1900s in Sheffield (Docherty, 1983, p. 39). Whilst the miners in the hills around Barnsley had organised a strong and permanent Miners Association of South Yorkshire in 1858 (Fields, 1980, p. 23), industrial cohesion and co-operation in major industrial centres was more elusive, conditioned by disarray in the small trades, who remained at the core of organising initiatives in Sheffield – in 1914, one trades spokesman gives a bleak picture:

> Men engaged in the industry did not support their unions because they felt that [they] could not give them any assistance... The unions were in a state of bankruptcy, commanding neither respect from employer nor employee... The whole outlook of the trade is most deplorable, and the condition of those engaged in the industry drifted from bad to worse. (Spring Knife Workers' Amalgamation, 1914)

Elsewhere in Britain, the movement for 'New Unions' based upon the mass membership of unskilled labourers with militant strategies was in full swing in the late 1880s and 1890s, in direct response to the use of un-unionised 'free labour' primarily in manual occupations such as on docks and in gasworks (Kapp, 1989). The most successful of these in South Yorkshire was the National Amalgamated Union of Labour (NAUL) in steel and engineering works; it was established from a position of strength

in contradistinction to the struggling craft unions, and as such provided a temporary pole of attraction for efforts to amalgamate, breathing new life into the Sheffield Federated Trades Council (SFTC) (Pollard, 1959, pp 219-221).

These New Unions terrified employers and the British state alike - nationally the membership of trade unions doubled in the two years from 1889-91 (Lovell, 1986, p. 21). The dockworkers' organisations in Hull, a significant port for the industrial goods produced in South Yorkshire, were so successful that they provoked a backlash of epic proportions from local authorities, with the myriad local institutions of state combining to crush the dockers' unions. This culminated in the deployment of troops, with two gunboats being moored on the Humber and the city resembling an 'armed camp' (Saville, 1967, pp. 228-230). This pattern was repeated in multiple ports across Britain – and from the mid-1890s, use of the law by employers to shut down strikes was increasingly common. The Taff Vale Decision, which made trade unions liable for their employers' losses during strikes, was a disaster for industrial unionism (Bealey & Pelling, 1956, Ch. 3 & 4). It seems intuitively highly likely that the legal backlash against unionism in the 1890s, more than other factors, convinced the fledgling trade union bureaucracy into accepting the overall limitations of capitalist structures and seeking to set up independent labour representation within the bourgeois state.

3.3. The Genesis of the Labour Party in South Yorkshire

As I hope to demonstrate in this paper, the relationship between working-class politics and formal political power and influence is rarely smooth – and the birth of the Labour Party in Sheffield demonstrates this perfectly. Lacking a national political organisation of their own, many trade unions had informal relationships with the Liberal Party who dominated Sheffield City Council for most of the nineteenth century. G. H. B. Ward, Sheffield engineer and leading socialist, railed against 'this benighted city of Liberal Labourism' (Mathers, 1979, p. 163), giving voice to the many trade unionists who felt no loyalty to the 'Old Union' ways entrenched in the upper echelons of the local union bureaucracy – but the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and the newly-formed Independent Labour Party (ILP) frequently clashed with one another and the SFTC, notably around the Attercliffe by-election of 1894 (Brown, 1975, p. 4). This became so acrimonious that from 1908-1920 Sheffield had two trades councils, one comprising of the 'Old Unions' arrayed around the SFTC, and the other, named the Sheffield Trades and Labour Club, formed by socialist activists, New Unionists and industrial workers (Pollard, 1959, p. 199).

Here we see a complex process of the formation of a new working-class political organisation, conditioned and complicated by the social stratification of a city in industrial flux, the cleavages between 'New' and 'Old' unions being laid bare by the obvious necessity of some kind of political organisation. Elsewhere in South Yorkshire, the genesis of Labour was much less hotly contested, reflecting the unique course of capitalist development in Sheffield – for example, in Barnsley the ILP

had a well-established branch by 1900, which had considerable political influence from the outset (Lindley, 1980). By 1906, explicitly working-class political culture was burgeoning in Sheffield – the local branch of the ILP launched its weekly the *Sheffield Guardian* on January 13th, and had doubled its membership to 500 by the end of the year. This is in addition to numerous other groups and societies, including the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabians, several socialist Sunday school and others[3].

But is it as simple as this? Does this mark the point at which the conditions and aspirations of working-class people in South Yorkshire began their inexorable rise, the structures which perpetuated the misery of the workers in South Yorkshire steadily eroded? To assume so would be to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the Labour Party and its relationship to the sources of social power in capitalist society. One disillusioned Labour supporter wrote in 1921 that:

> Between those days of ardent faith and heroic self-sacrifice, those days of Kier Hardie's cloth cap in the House of Commons, and these days with its political machine with its seeking of votes and place, there is a great gulf fixed. (Desmond, 1921, p. 55)

This myth of Labour's 'golden age' can be contrasted sharply with the reality of the process we have observed in Sheffield, where the bureaucratic heads of the trade union movement had to be dragged into supporting a new Party, with the idea of abolishing capitalism rarely discussed even by the ILP. As Kier Hardie himself put it, 'The number of Labour Members in the House of Commons. This, to me, is the question of questions.'(Cliff & Gluckstein, 1996, p 12). The Labour Party quickly became *de facto* unmoored from its members when in 1906 it passed a resolution at its founding conference delegating the timing and implementation of all future policy set at its conference to the Parliamentary Labour Party and the National Executive, rather than having direct input from the membership (Cliff & Gluckstein, 1996, p. 40). This led R. T. McKenzie to write in 1955 that 'The term "The Labour Party" is properly applied only to the mass organisation of the party *outside* Parliament; it supports in Parliament a distinct and separate organisation, "The Parliamentary Labour Party".' (McKenzie, 1964, p. 12 note). From its inception, it can be seen that the Labour Party was a highly imperfect expression of working-class politics.

The immediate aftermath of the First World War was not a return of heroes to God's Own Country: the sudden drop in demand for the region's massive industrial output of steel and coal led to levels of unemployment hitherto unseen, with between forty and fifty thousand unemployed in Sheffield in the winter of 1921. Local authorities were utterly unprepared (Price, 2010, pp. 120-121). The 1920s were fractious nationally on the industrial plane: an average of 28 million work days per year were lost due to strikes and lockouts between 1919 and 1927 (Lovell, 1986, p. 57), and it is during this period that Allen charts the rise of the national trade union

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3   Archives of the Sheffield Guardian, passim.

bureaucracy in the form of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) (Allen, 1971, Ch. 13).

The 1926 General Strike was supported enthusiastically by local Labour politicians, and activity was coordinated by the Sheffield Trades and Labour Club's Central Disputes Committee. It is no exaggeration to say that this body briefly became the *de facto* state in Sheffield, exercising practical control over the running of factories and services (Peck, 1970, p. 9). The local Labour Party's support of the strike, combined with the dead-end presented by a TUC unwilling and unprepared to fight serious national strikes, secured them their first control of the council in the elections in that year, institutionalising *to some degree* the interests of the overwhelmingly working-class population of Sheffield within the structures of the local state.

4. SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH YORKSHIRE

4.1. Whither Social Democracy?

We have explored the kind of society which existed before the Second World War in South Yorkshire, how capitalist relations enforced by a hostile state resulted in poverty and misery for working-class people, and how the interests and aspirations generated by insecurity and social degradation expressed themselves imperfectly in a Labour Party which was never quite moored to the working-class. Now, we turn to the period where, according to Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, 'most of our people have never had it so good.' ("On This Day", 2014).

The years between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the election of Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979 are known as the 'post-war consensus', which, as Richard Toye points out, was very much a consciously invoked political statement as much as a reality of post-war politics (Toye, 2013). The relative stability of the state, the continual upward trend in both wages and productivity, and comparative industrial quiescence can be explained using the framework developed by the regulation school of political theorists. Drawing much inspiration from Antonio Gramsci, this school states that societies achieve temporary 'modes of reproduction': that is, specific sets of contingent institutions, ideas and methods of economic redistribution, which reproduce the continued dominance of and accumulation by a particular class (Boyer, 1990, p. 12). In the case of the post-war consensus, we can understand this regime as being maintained by the trade union bureaucracy, British political parties with the Labour Party chief amongst them, the unusual longevity of the post-war economic boom, and external factors such as the threat of the USSR during the Cold War.

British industrial unionism was arguably at its strongest in the late 1940s. Total union membership stood at nearly 10 million in 1948 (Wrigley, 1997, p. 30), with establishment figures even such as Churchill paying them homage at the Conservative

Party conference in 1947 as 'a long established and essential part of our national life.' (Wrigley, 1997, p. 44). That even Churchill should have to pay lip service to the unions speaks volumes: the post-war consensus in this respect can be thought of as a consensus between political parties as the 'thinking' part of the capitalist class, defined in contradistinction to the movement of the organised working-class. Unlike the Great War, union militancy only fell for the first two years of war, and such a response shocked those within the state. As Pugh puts it, 'concessions were no more than a means of achieving the co-operation in the war effort that was so crucially necessary' (Pugh, 2007, p. 261). Throughout the period of post-war consensus, the consent of the trade union bureaucracy was a simple necessity for effective government, as Ted Heath discovered to his loss even towards the end of the period.

But hand in hand with the political class' imperative to take account of the trade unions goes the inverse: that trade union bureaucrats became convinced of the rightness of following the government. There is no better example of this than the co-operation of the trade unions with Labour's wage restraint and deflationary policies often at the expense of their members, of which Faustian pact Cliff and Gluckstein are fiercely critical (1996, pp 231-233). But nevertheless, the position which trade unions occupied in national culture cannot be ignored, forming an ideological counterweight to the kind of ideas espoused by bourgeois state institutions — that is, the new education system, the formal political system and the capitalist media — as well as providing a forum within which working-class people could engage with politics at a grassroots level. The sheer mass of the unions meant that they simply could not be ignored by politicians.

Another significant factor in the post-war consensus was the strength and longevity of the economic boom, the scale and atypicality of which cannot be explained merely by newly discovered technologies. Understanding the reasons behind this requires us to examine Marx's theory of the rate of profit. Briefly: when capitalists invest capital into production by buying more efficient machinery, larger factories and other aids to magnify the labour of the workforce, that capital becomes fixed, it does not produce any extra value. Since capitalists have to compete against other capitalists in order to accumulate through gaining comparative advantages over their fellows (eg. greater market share), the amount of money invested *tends* to increase and the amount of profit made *tends* to fall, whilst being potentially counteracted by countervailing tendencies (Gillman, 1957). One of these countervailing tendencies is the destruction of capital — literally when the fixed capital sunk into factories, machinery and tools is devalued by crisis or physically destroyed. Kliman demonstrates conclusively that the rate of profit was restored significantly during the 1940s following the Second World War, before slumping in the period after 1957 (Kliman, 2009). This prosperity crucially gave politicians within the period just enough financial leeway in order to enact significant redistributive measures and to implement the welfare state in pursuit of social cohesion.

Finally amongst the chief factors of the post-war consensus is the Cold War. Though full of socialist zeal when out of power, when it assumed government in 1945 on the

very day of electoral victory, Nye Bevan announced that 'British foreign policy will not be altered in any way under the Labour government' (Evening News, 26th July 1945). Five years later, the same government followed the US's lead into the Korean War, exhibiting the same anti-communism which had let it to electoral disaster over the handling of the Zinoviev letter in 1924. It is difficult to imagine the relative quiescence of the British ruling class in the face of significant social reform without the twin factors of the existence of the USSR and the Cold War, which raised spectres of revolution at home. The concomitant anti-communist stance taken by the Labour government in 1945 and by all governments since simultaneously reassured elites of the Parliamentary Labour Party's credibility as a party of capitalist government.

4.2. The Peak of Industrial Capitalism

As during the First World War, South Yorkshire became a workshop of war. The River Don Works' steam hammer was converted to build Spitfire parts; other firms made significant leaps forward in terms of innovation in toolmaking (Holiday, 1987). However, unlike the Great War, South Yorkshire was not decimated by a slump following the Second World War. Though demands for coal nationalisation in 1919 had brought Britain closer to revolution than at any point in its history, it took a near-revolt at the 1949 Labour Party conference to commit Attlee's government to the complete nationalisation of coal and steel. Yet this might not be the world-changing event it appears: during the war, the mixed economy and the routine and penetrative intervention of government into economic affairs was established as real fact (Pugh, 2007, p. 260). And though nationalisation affected more than two million workers, many of whom were in South Yorkshire, and covered one-fifth of total economic activity, there it ended (Cliff & Gluckstein, 1996, p 222). Many workers in South Yorkshire found themselves simply facing a government-appointed bureaucrat rather than an employer, a change many thought insignificant. Miner Abe Moffat's account of nationalisation is dismissive at best:

> We supported the idea of nationalisation, even if it was not the type of nationalisation we would have wanted. Proof of that fact was the composition of the National Coal Board, on which there has always been a majority of people who had never supported nationalisation in their lives, and never even supported Labour. (Moffat, 1965, p. 86)

However, it cannot be denied that by the 1960s, numerous advantages had been gained by workers in South Yorkshire: the patchwork of local healthcare provision and charitable aid which most poor workers in the region had to rely on was replaced gradually by the National Health Service, enacted by the Attlee government in 1946. Employment was nominally full, with women entering the labour force for the first time in such numbers – in 1951, 32% of workers in the region were now female (Hey, 1998, p. 272). Hey gives us a solid account of the renovations of Sheffield City Centre in the years following the War, including new thoroughfares through

the city's cluttered middle, how large new offices and apartments were built, and how public buildings were cleaned or extended, contributing to a feeling of urban renewal which was at least cosmetically pleasing (Hey, 1998, p. 273-4).

Sheffield's perennial housing problems, were finally ameliorated significantly in this period. One special case deserves particular attention as a microcosmic example of social-democracy in South Yorkshire: that of Park Hill. Though slum clearances had been underway before the War, drastic solutions were needed to replace a decaying housing stock. City architect J. Lewis Womersley took inspiration from le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation development in Marseilles in order to create 'streets in the sky'. His vision was 'so planned as to give each household privacy and quiet despite the essentially communal nature of the project... Each dwelling, irrespective of size, is provided with a large sheltered balcony where small children can play in the open air, where a pram can be put out and on which an occasional meal can be taken.' ("Park Hill: Continuity and Change", 2014). This was an immeasurable improvement for many of the 996 families who took up residence on its completion in 1961. Brenda Hague was 22 when she was one of the first to move in:

> It was luxury. Me, my husband and our baby were living in a back-to-back [Victorian terraced house]. My parents were there, too, and my brother. We had no bathroom, just a tin bath on the back of the door. So when we got here it was marvellous. Three bedrooms, hot water, always warm. And the view. It's lovely, especially at night, when it's all lit up. (Cooke, 2008)

Park Hill was designed to mirror the communities which it replaced, including proper street names for each of its rows of flats, and facilities for residents including its own pub. It represents the high point of municipal social democracy, where along with undeniable social gains the aspirations of the upwardly mobile middle-classes were spread to, albeit sometimes imposed upon, the working class. Yet Park Hill's decline after the 1970s also mirrors the arc of the class for whom it was designed to serve.

Yet, was South Yorkshire's social-democracy as encompassing as later writers have asserted? Jeremy Seabrook gives us clues that this may not have been the case. Though his analysis does not deal directly with South Yorkshire, he provides familiar images which surely were reproduced across the region in the 1960s and 1970s. His account is full of authentic working-class voices from the latter period of the post-war consensus, as it began to crumble. His interview with George Hodgkinson, a former shop steward and ILP member who was eighty-five at the time of Seabrook's interview in 1978, is certainly worth reproducing in part here:

> I think there's a lot of disappointment, distress even, because of the Labour Party's failure to fulfil its promises. These promises are always interpreted as meaning material prosperity... [but] it promised a different kind of society, and it hasn't happened... The kind of prosperity which the labour movement has managed to wrest from capitalism has been acquired at terrible human cost. (Seabrook, 1978, pp. 167-168)

This serves us with a salient reminder that the bounty of the post-war consensus did not touch all communities equally, and some not at all. This can be explained as a function of the parties involved in the post-war regime of accumulation: as a pact between the imperfect representatives of the labour movement and the capitalist class, those not covered by either found themselves largely excluded. Secondly, it reminds us that even if South Yorkshire's labour movement *had* managed to secure material prosperity for all through a greater proportion of national income going to the working-class, it would still not have been the social change desperately sought by the masses who had consistently participated within it. Fundamentally, the post-war consensus was one in which the uppermost part of the organised working-class movement voluntarily decided to become caretakers of capitalism, sacrificing their ability to satisfy the interests and needs of their constituents.

5. NEOLIBERALISM IN GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

5.1. Neoliberalism as class power

This paper has discussed above how we can conceive of the post-war consensus as a specific regime of accumulation dependent on a mediated and contested balance of social forces – in this case, the capitalist state was able to mollify the demands of the working-class movement due to the prolonged economic upswing after 1945, redistributing just enough surplus value in the form of wages and social safety nets to prevent upheaval. But in the early 1970s, a range of factors coincided to undermine the viability of the consensus, and the rise of a new political orthodoxy in the form of the New Right was determined to impose a new regime of accumulation.

The 1970s were a rocky decade for the British economy. International crises such as OAPEC's 1973 embargo on oil, the new fuel for capitalist industry, added to Britain's domestic problems of serious inflation and the return of mass unemployment (Pugh, 2007, pp. 339-340). The underlying fall in the rate of profit discussed by Kliman, to which this paper has already made reference, underlies this surface-level economic turmoil: since there was no significant devaluation of capital, successive governments having successfully prevented or delayed economic crisis through Keynesian measures, rates of profit had been driven down by capitalist competition and ever-increasing technological investment (Kliman, 2009).

Karl Marx handily gives us a guide to processes which may restore the rate of profit and thus allow continued accumulation in six points: more intense exploitation of labour, reduction of wages below the value of labour power, cheapening the cost of fixed capital, maintaining a reserve army of unemployed labour, increasing foreign trade, and the spreading of productive costs through the use of joint stock (Marx, 1959, Ch. 14). Some writers see this list, square it mechanistically and awkwardly

with Thatcher's policies and declare that she must have been acting consciously and deliberately in the interests of the global capitalist class. (Ross, 1983). This analysis is of course far too simplistic. There is no coincidence that Thatcher's policies ended up hugely benefitting the ruling class at the expense of the working-class in Britain, but it was certainly not a grand master-plan. It is far better conceived of as a see-sawing, reactive and often disastrously ineffective response to looming capitalist crisis at the end of the post-war consensus, filtered through the radical doctrine of monetarism, set out by Friedrich von Hayek in his 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). The principle obstacle to any attempts to rebalance the relationship between labour and capital in favour of capital was the organised working-class movement, the destruction of which is still raw in South Yorkshire.

5.2. The murder of South Yorkshire's industry

Before the Miners' Strike of 1984, the opening shots of the conflict between Thatcher's government and the organised working-class came in 1980, when the steelworkers' union the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) was goaded into national action over wages and pay. Despite it being the first strike of the ISTC for 54 years, the steelworkers held out for 14 weeks before capitulating (Docherty, 1983, pp. 151-152).

Heartrending and informative accounts of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike in South Yorkshire are not difficult to come by, so this paper will not dwell on the specifics overlong. Jonathon and Ruth Winterton provide perhaps the most thorough empirical examination of the Strike in South Yorkshire, detailing possible scenarios for restructuring the coal industry and proving beyond all doubt that the closure of the coalfields initiated by Thatcher was a move which only made sense as a political attempt to undermine the strongest of the trade unions, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) (Winterton & Winterton, 1989). But the true cost of the miners' loss cannot be conveyed in statistics. The rich history provided by the Hatfield mining community in *A Year of Our Lives* goes some way towards illustrating what communities in South Yorkshire experienced. For the community, 'There was a sick emptiness. Almost a feeling of desperate loss going in to work the next day, we all looked sheepish. It felt almost like scabbing. We were doing something which every pore of our being told us not to do.' (Hume et al, 1986). The Thatcher government's use of the Metropolitan Police Force as a paramilitary extension to South Yorkshire Police became etched into popular memory at the Battle of Orgreave on 18th June 1984.

South Yorkshire's economy and society went over the cliff-edge in 1984 from which it has never recovered. By 1985, unemployment in South Yorkshire was running at 17.3%, compared to 10.4% in Greater London (Beattie, 1986, p. 17). In a perceptive analysis of local health inequalities, Thunhurst concludes that social class is by far the main determinant of life expectancy; he even discovered that the death rate was 10% higher than the national average (Thunhurst, 1985, p. 116; p. 32). G. Green et al's inquiry into 'social capital' in rural South Yorkshire finds conditions

little better in surrounding villages, with lower levels of employment, higher levels of deprivation, and many more long-term illnesses than national averages (Green et al, 2000, pp. 19-32). Startlingly, in 1986, half of all households in Barnsley were in receipt of housing benefit, with one in five people out of work (Sheffield Central Policy Unit, 1986). Put simply, it is difficult to overestimate the scale of damage done to South Yorkshire by the dismantling of the trade union movement through workplace closures and physical confrontation. It is for this reason that the Miners' Strike is still known in South Yorkshire as a 'civil war without guns' (Smith, 2014).

5.3. Labour sells out

Though virtually unsourceable and probably apocryphal, there is a popular tale that says that when Margaret Thatcher was asked what her proudest achievement was, she replied 'Tony Blair and New Labour'. In Sheffield we can see that despite being known colloquially as the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire', Labour presented little challenge to the new logic of privatised services, rigid council spending and local taxation proposed by the Conservatives in the 1980s. This underlines my thesis about the criticality of unity between working-class people and their political representatives.

The 'de-industrialisation' of South Yorkshire began before the Thatcher government, thousands of jobs having already gone in a perfect storm exacerbated by her government's aggressive market policies towards steel production: chronic underinvestment, the 1973 Oil Crisis, and new labour-saving technology are all blamed various by members of Sheffield's Labour leadership of the time (Allender, 2001, p. 77). The trade union response to decline was fragmented and contradictory, with a disorganised display of solidarity with the 1980 steel strike having little national impact. As a left-leaning Labour Council, though not on par with the Liverpool Militant council of 1983-7, Sheffield City Council set up an Employment Department during the Miners' Strike – but rather than providing actual assistance at a local level by enacting public works, providing relief and so on, it confined itself to propping up failing businesses and creating 'equal opportunities' frameworks (Allender, 2001, pp. 84-5). However, economic policy began to shift from even the most basic public intervention towards 'partnerships' with the private sector, evidenced in pamphlets even before the Miners' Strike (Blunkett, 1983). It is also clear that in the period after 1984 the Council engaged in high-profile but ruinously expensive projects such as the Supertram system and hosting the World Student Games, whilst simultaneously failing to provide basic services (Allender, 2001, p. 95). To borrow Patrick Seyd's phrase, the Labour group seemed unable to provide any alternative to Conservative-enforced misery for the residents of Sheffield and became more concerned simply with 'the political management of decline' (Seyd, 1993). This is a fact which did not go unnoticed by working-class voters in Sheffield: between 1973 and 1993 Labour's vote decreased from 53% to a bare 38% (Allender, 2001, p. 95). The rise of the Liberal Democrats in Sheffield demonstrates another important

facet: that people are often willing to give electoral power to whoever might be offering solutions when times are dire. Though unemployment fell from its peak of over 17%, the scars left by the experience of industrial trauma have certainly not yet healed.

6. WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The forcible destruction of the working-class movement in South Yorkshire, and the political suicide of its supposedly left-wing champions in the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire has left a class without a political expression, who remain at the mercy of the impersonal profit motive of large companies.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, and in lieu of any serious resistance from the trade union movement, there has been an explosion in 'zero-hour' contracts — that is, contracts which guarantee no hours of work per week, whilst requiring the worker to work whatever hours their employer offers them. In this situation, one can work five hours one week and fifty-five the next, with no certainly of income and no continuity or regular pattern to life. The general trade union Unite refer to a 'subclass of insecure employment' which now encompasses more than five million workers (Flynn, 2014). This is more than coincidentally similar to the position that many thousands of so-called 'free labour' workers in South Yorkshire found themselves in at the end of the nineteenth century, which we examined at the start of this paper. Even more concerningly, half of those 5 million workers are young workers, between 16 and 30, and anecdotal evidence for the abuse of these contracts is readily available — for example, from the author of this paper. Though officially unemployment has fallen to 6.4% nationally ("Bank of England cuts wage growth forecast", 2014), the rise of zero-hour contracts since 2008 makes the true extent of underemployment near-impossible to judge on current data, since a worker counts as employed even if they receive no hours from their zero-hour contract.

Wages have also taken a drastic hit since the 2008 financial crisis, falling on average around 8% in real terms (Roberts, 2014). Meanwhile, it has recently been reported that the UK has 100 billionaires for the first time in history.

Under these conditions of ever-increasing seriousness it is unsurprising that working-class voters turn to parties such as UKIP, even with policies such as a flat rate of tax for all and the final privatisation of the National Health Service ("Local Elections: What Does UKIP Stand For?", 2013). What we are observing in South Yorkshire is the cynical exploitation of a feeling of groundlessness and loss of identity caused by the de-industrialisation of a region, combined with a political vacuum within working-class politics created by local Labour politicians who no longer have a transformative vision of society, and whose leadership has shackled them to carrying out the austerity measures of the Conservative-Liberal coalition (Whitaker, 2014). To dismiss the concerns of voters as racist is dangerous, as Seabrook remind

us. Though his words are from another industrial northern city almost 50 years ago, they are still just as relevant to the here and now:

> The pain of these working-class communities is real and deep; and it hasn't been recognised by those who claim to care for working people… Increasing prosperity is insufficient unless there is some corresponding sense of being affirmed and validated in what people can give or achieve. People will always remain inconsolable when they are denied a sense of purpose; and rightly so. The resentment against black people only conceals the true source of the wound that has afflicted Blackburn. (Seabrook, 1978, p. 162)

This essay has traced a thread of working-class history which ties the present directly to the past: the insecurity, poverty and misery of working-class life in South Yorkshire. I have shown that there is a direct correlation between the fortunes of the working-class and the kind of working-class political forms which have taken shape over the long-twentieth century, primarily that the trade union movement, despite its imperfections, its hesitancy and its bureaucratism, acted as a social counterweight to the attacks of the ruling-class, and that once this movement was shattered by a politically astute and aggressive government in the 1980s that we have seen a reversion-to-type for capitalism. The social moment of the post-war consensus was highly contingent and fragile, and not as extensive as could have been hoped. Nevertheless, those thirty years demonstrated the sheer power which the organised working-class could wield even imperfectly and through a thoroughly bourgeoisified working-class party.

My ultimate conclusion is that the structures of capitalism results in only one outcome, sooner or later: the house always wins. Chief amongst the urgent tasks confronting the working-class movement is the re-creation of a pro-working-class political culture amongst poor urban communities – initiatives such as Unite's Community Unions could provide a good way to circumvent the uphill challenges of workplace organisation in South Yorkshire's scattered workplaces and service industries. There is no optimistic conclusion – the struggle continues.

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