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NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH INDUSTRIAL TOWNS

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In his great work, The Making of the English Working Class,<sup>1</sup> E.P. Thompson has stated that by 1832 the industrial labouring masses were fully established as a class with a political consciousness of their own. One would expect, therefore, according to Thompson, that the principal division, both socially and politically, between people living in industrial areas after 1832 would have been that between the working class and the propertied interests--between the "haves" and the "have-nots". This has been a concern of labour historians going back to Marx. There is certainly evidence to suggest that this class division provided the impetus behind some social and political movements--especially Chartism in certain regions<sup>2</sup>--after 1832. Yet, for the most part, the issues of class division and conflict assumed a secondary position in the life of the nation between 1832 and the late eighteen-seventies. Concerted efforts on the part of working men to alter the social order either through politics or by other means had to wait until the late nineteenth century. The reasons for this may have varied in different regions of the country. The purpose of this paper is to assert that, insofar as four towns of the North-West(taken collectively)are concerned, the most important type of organized division between people was that inspired by sectarianism. If one views nineteenth century England with the concerns of E.P. Thompson, or other labour historians, therefore, one must see sectarianism as a

prime inhibiting, diverting or at least subduing force in the development of class conflict in these towns.

The towns selected for this study were four medium-sized industrial communities in the North-West--Bolton, Preston and Blackburn in Lancashire, and Stockport, just across the Mersey in North Cheshire.<sup>3</sup> The towns were originally chosen because they seemed to resemble each other so much--each being about the same size at mid-nineteenth century (mean population in 1851: 58,000), all four having the same pattern of rapid population growth, and all dependent on the same basic industry--cotton manufacturing. Because this study focused on sectarianism, one other criterion was originally added in the selection of towns. By reference to the religious census of 1851, the number of Churchmen on the one hand and the combined number of old denominationalists (Dissenters and Catholics) on the other were found to be roughly equal. I felt in selecting for this additional criterion that one could expect more sectarian conflict in such circumstances than in a situation where one religious group had a gross numerical preponderance over others. As the paper progresses, I am sure that you will also see that this last criterion was not important.

As the research revealed, sectarian conflict was the chief manifestation of sectarianism in these towns. This was not surprising. As early as 1930 the Hammonds stated in their book, The Age of Chartists: "There was more religious strife in Manchester or Bradford in the forties than in the Roman Empire under the rule of Augustus."<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, much more to be said about sectarian conflict, chiefly concerning how it was organized in society. The social mechanism of sectarian conflict reveals how this phenomenon was able to become a more important source of

organized division among people in these towns at this time than that of class.

According to John Foster's excellent article, "Nineteenth Century Towns--A Class Dimension,"<sup>5</sup> there were certain prerequisites which made class conflict a highly probable occurrence in a Victorian town. These are also, I think, the prerequisites of common sense. The chief prerequisite was the existence of a single type of industry which embraced the majority of the town's manual labour force. This situation, Foster asserts, caused almost a single sub-culture to be created in the town embracing most of the local community's propertyless. This single sub-culture then made it easier for the working class to see itself as a unified social group operating against the propertied classes on numerous issues. Class conflict, then, was most probable under such circumstances. This situation was certainly applicable to all four Northern "cotton towns". It is interesting to note that the town most prone to class conflict among those Foster studied was a Lancashire cotton town--Oldham.<sup>6</sup>

All four Northern towns were almost completely dependent on the cotton industry. Mining, iron founding and engineering firms played a very small part in the economic growth of these towns in this part of the nineteenth century. Most male manual workers and most females able to work were employed in the cotton mills.<sup>7</sup> These millhands were ruled by a small number of factory owners, almost all of whom were resident in the towns. Upward mobility was very difficult in the nineteenth century. Millowners were visibly the owning class in the new industrial order and they appeared even more so in some of the industrial suburbs of these towns which they created and ruled almost as private estates. It is easy

to see all of Foster's prerequisites for class conflict in these towns. Evidence both before and after 1832<sup>8</sup> also indicates that industrial relations were bad in all four towns. Yet crystallized class conflict occurred in only one of these towns after 1832--Preston.

The chief reason for this can be found, I believe, in the way sectarianism functioned in these communities. In order to see the operation of sectarianism in these towns, however, it is necessary to see how the various denominations and sects fitted into the social fabric of each area. The uniqueness of the social composition and social outlook of each group must also be noted here. The individual character of each congregation is almost as important as the small but significant differences in the general social structures of each town. Time, however, necessitates the making of certain generalizations. What follows here is a summary of the research done on these denominations and sects in the search for the principal mechanism(s) by which sectarianism operated.

Being numerically but one of the many religious groups in the towns, Anglicanism was really more of a denomination than an Established Church in the context of local society. Its official position in the nation, however, made it function as a sort of registration agency and convenient scene of important events in one's life--baptism, marriage, burial. The hard evidence on adherents to the Church is scant,<sup>9</sup> and suffers from this over-riding problem of just who were believing Anglicans. There was, however, an important group of Anglican laymen who usually safeguarded the interests of the Church in each town. Gentlemen of independent means, professional people, large merchants and wealthy manufacturers formed Anglican elites in each town. These Anglican elites

were the core of the anciens regimes that usually governed the towns until the administrative reforms of the eighteen-thirties. They were usually tolerant toward other denominational groups in society provided their primacy of position in town society was not threatened.<sup>10</sup>

Protestant Dissenters also had an elite group of their own in three of these towns by 1832. Though the sources indicate, quite predictably, that the bulk of chapel members were tradesmen and shopkeepers,<sup>11</sup> there were significant numbers of wealthy manufacturers and other men of means in the chapels of Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn. These men of substance were important not only for the financial survival of chapels but also as living status inducements for people lower on the social scale to associate with Dissent. The number of Dissenters in Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn rose sharply in the period after the Industrial Revolution, well into the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> In Preston, where there was no Nonconformist elite, the numerical growth rate of congregations was much less dramatic.

The relationship between the Nonconformist elites in each town and social groups lower in social status--particularly working-class people--is not clear. Benevolence was practised by the wealthy at times, both inside and outside the chapel.<sup>13</sup> Again, attitudes varied with congregation and town. The important relationship between the elites and the lower middle class and upper working class tradesmen and shopkeepers also needs to be mentioned here. These latter groups were the right-hand men of the elites in chapel. In Bolton and Blackburn, tradesmen and shopkeepers were allowed to become trustees--indicating a good relationship and the sharing of power with the elites there. In the very

important Unitarian congregation of Stockport, however, the elite dominated chapel affairs with little respect for the lower orders though they could have been challenged. These factors were of some importance when the Nonconformist elites came to challenge the ascendancy of the Anglican elites over town life. It was in the relationship between the Anglican and Dissenting elites and their relationship, in turn, with other groups in society that the really important mechanism of sectarianism could be found. It was from the conflict between the elites that sectarian conflict in general was successfully organized in towns.

Roman Catholics and members of the new sects were found primarily in the lower ranks of society but were not concerned with upsetting the industrial social order on behalf of the working classes. Roman Catholics were numerous in all four towns.<sup>14</sup> With the exception of Preston, all Catholic congregations were composed almost completely of poor Irishmen. The Catholic Church in all four towns was concerned primarily with ministering to its own, which was quite enough in the way of activity. Catholics had largely a ghetto mentality in these communities. When they engaged in sectarian conflict it was usually in response to external threats.

The new sects, often overlooked by historians, were quite active in all these Northern towns at this time. The Mormon and New Churches, the "religious" new sects, were extremely busy among the working classes. The adherence of workers to these sects reflects, in part, the sense of alienation felt by people in the labouring population. These sects bore all of the withdrawal-syndrome characteristics of Max Weber's sect-type groups.<sup>15</sup>

The so-called secular sects must also be noted. Running from the various organizations of Teetotalism to the ritualistic friendly societies, from groups that approached religious denominations in status to societies greatly inferior to even Weber's sect-types in terms of organization, these groups embraced the bulk of the labouring masses in the towns. Like the religious new sects they were essentially inward-looking and provided no criticism of the social order. There was one exception to this last statement--the Secularists.<sup>16</sup> Appealing primarily to the "aristocrats of labour"--skilled artisans, well-paid tradesmen, etc.--Secularism was a well-organized sect that did offer a criticism of the existing social order and the ideas behind that social order, including sectarianism. Their numbers were too few, however, to disrupt the social order, much less sectarian conflict in a noticeable way.

In Preston, the new sects assumed a more important role in society than they did in the other towns. Part of this was perhaps accidental--both British Mormonism and Teetotalism originated in the town. But the special character of the latter group in Preston was, I believe, a product of the special circumstances of Preston society itself. Teetotalism, in the other towns, was really only a working class society presided over by the old denominations. In Preston, it was much more of a full-fledged sect, with Teetotal christenings, weddings and funerals.<sup>17</sup> Most of the leaders of Preston Teetotalism were lower middle class or upper working class tradesmen and shopkeepers and usually had been Nonconformists--the social groups that would have been the right-hand men of a local Nonconformist elite had one existed. In spite of their limited resources, these Teetotal leaders, probably out of their special concern for social

improvement, wanted a suitable atmosphere for the development of their sect in Preston society. In this endeavour they made an attempt to loosen the grip of the local Anglican elite on town society which happened to coincide with the town's large propertied class. In this instance, then, Teetotalism contributed to class conflict.

In the process of examining the social composition and some of the social attitudes of the various denominations and sects, the principal mechanism of sectarianism in these towns has been suggested--that of the contest between these Anglican and Nonconformist elites for control of local society. This contest was the principal organizing force behind sectarian conflict in general which, in turn, was the main divisive influence among people in three of these towns.

In Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn, the Nonconformist and Church elites tried to organize support inside and outside their chapels in the struggle for control of town society. From the evidence, the force of sectarian conflict was actually not best expressed in direct denominational confrontation itself. There were not enough important issues of a direct denominational nature to make this the main area of the contest. The Church rate and educational matters were probably the two most frequent sources of trouble. Normally these issues were resolved by skillful negotiations between denominations or by swift contests of strength.

The force of organized sectarian conflict was, in fact, best expressed in politics--and most particularly in local politics in these towns. The aim of directing town society was the goal. Control of town government was a prime way to achieve it--it was a prize worth taking. The Anglican and Nonconformist elites formed the backbone of the Tory and

Liberal parties respectively in Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn. In the last-mentioned town the vibrant tradesman and shopkeeping classes in Dissent made up somewhat for the weaknesses of the Nonconformist elite in that town. In Preston, however, the Anglican elite dominated the scene and so supported both the Tory and Whig-Liberal groups in town. The Teetotallers of Preston were the backbone of the short-lived Radical Liberal party thrust of the late eighteen-thirties. These were the core groups in the political factions in these towns. This did not mean that there were not other groups associated with these parties, e.g., moderate Anglicans in the Liberal party and Wesleyan Methodists in the Tory group. The cores of the parties, at least in Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn, were members of these denominational elites. One further note, the Nonconformist elite had a group identity in spite of being composed of denominationalists with theological differences with one another.<sup>18</sup> They were all in agreement that they were opposed to the Church interest and this seemed to give them more than enough group solidarity.

The same sort of political struggles over incorporation, in poor law unions and above all in the corporations described by A. Temple Patterson<sup>19</sup> in the town of Leicester in this period took place in Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn. Much of the population became embroiled in these struggles dividing the societies of these three towns on vertical lines running from the denominational elites downward. The local political leaders therefore resembled the national political leaders in being propertied. The overt expressions of denominational animosities in local governmental bodies were few and not too important for sectarianism. Whatever these demonstrations were, (e.g., refusal by Dissenters in the corporation to participate in ceremonies in the Parish Church), they merely

acted as small reinforcements of the main, well-understood fact that sectarian stances were at the whole base of local politics. Viewing local politics in this way, the issues-orientated approach of Temple Patterson and H.J. Hanham<sup>20</sup> to English local politics seems rather mistaken and superficial when applied to these towns.

In many ways the group taking the most initiative in local politics in Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn was Dissent. Filled with high hopes when admitted into local government with the administrative reforms of the eighteen-thirties, the Nonconformists took a while to realize that all was not sweetness and light when they gained control of the agencies of local government. Some Nonconformists in these towns were imbued with a special sense of localism emanating from the very organization of their own denominations. They took a special interest in local as opposed to national government.<sup>21</sup> Sooner or later, however, it was obvious that the almost equal economic and social power of Dissent and Church would lead to a stalemate in local politics. Nevertheless both groups continued to vie for control of local government well into the eighteen-seventies. In Preston, except for the brief attempt of the Radical Liberal Teetotallers in the corporation and poor law union to bring in a "mania of reform",<sup>22</sup> things were very quiet in local politics. It is interesting to note that local government in this town was also extremely ineffective from 1835 to 1870.

In the activities of national politics at the local level the electorate was in general smaller and people seemingly less interested than in the activities of local government. One proof of this can be seen in the survival of corrupt practices well into the eighteen-sixties with

little public outcry. In Bolton, Stockport and Blackburn, sectarianism once again dominated the scene, thanks to the work of the local elites. A systematic examination of speeches, propaganda, the presentation of national issues at the local level and what national issues seemed to be important at election time in these towns reveals the great presence of sectarianism. An inspection of pollbooks in existence for some of these towns reveals no startling difference in the social and economic background of Liberal and Conservative voters. Their differences must have been in other areas not recorded and differing sectarian stances are clearly prime possibilities among these differences.

In Preston, however, the activities of national politics, as those of local politics, were different from those of the other towns. The secular issues of free trade versus protection, for example, were very important to Prestonians in the late eighteen-thirties and eighteen-forties. Sectarian issues were almost always imported from the national party centres in London--Papal Aggression, the unification of Italy, the Irish Church Disestablishment.<sup>23</sup> As early as the election of 1830 Henry Hunt had challenged the working classes of the town to vote for him against the Tory and Whig propertied interests. The wide franchise in the town especially before 1832 (Preston was a lot and scot borough) made this possible. The pollbooks indicate that when Liberal candidates presented themselves as Radical Reformers they did get large working class support. Sectarian propaganda after 1832, the special behaviour of Catholic voters and the shelling out of enormous sums for bribery<sup>24</sup> did something to correct this.

In Preston, however, sectarian conflict was just not important

enough to frustrate class conflict. In the case of the Teetotal-Anglican elite conflict it actually reinforced class conflict. Tension between the propertied and propertyless in the town was evident in every decade. Between October 1853 and May 1854 one of the most serious confrontations between capital and labour in nineteenth-century England occurred in Preston. Every millowner opposed virtually every millhand in the so-called Preston Strike. The ferocity of the confrontation and the cost in human suffering received nation-wide attention. It also produced some very militant ideas among the working classes. For example, a certain Mr. Grinshaw,<sup>25</sup> a millhand and a member of the Wages Movement in the town, once suggested during the Strike that the entire labour force move itself physically to another place in Lancashire and build its own co-operative mill town, called "New Regenerated Preston". The man was not treated as a crank by his fellow workers.

Stockport also experienced some serious but short-lived class strife through Chartism in the late eighteen-thirties and early forties. This was probably due to the poor liaison between some of the Nonconformist elite (principally the Unitarian elite) and the lower ranks of Nonconformity in town mentioned earlier. Eventually, however, the waves of sectarian conflict were too strong to resist. Sectarian conflict was also assisted by the intense Anti-Catholicism so evident in the town's masses from 1850 onward.

As we have seen, all four towns qualified about equally as potential sites of class conflict. Yet class conflict on a dramatic scale occurred in only one of these towns, Preston. Preston was also the only town where sectarian conflict was not properly organized. I believe that I

have shown step by step that these two phenomena were connected. With sectarian conflict not being properly organized in Preston, the class issue as well as other secular issues were allowed to come to the forefront of people's considerations.

What seems to be the logical conclusion from all of this is that sectarian conflict, far from being a disrupting influence, ultimately helped to maintain the social order of these towns. It did so by organizing people's efforts into a struggle not concerned with the problems of class conflict. There is no suggestion here of any bourgeois plot behind all of this.

Certain astute political leaders may have seen the benefits to the social order of sectarian fervour as, for example, in the toying of local Tory politicians with Orangeism throughout this period. But what is much more certain is that the very operation of sectarianism itself in these towns, when properly organized, did contribute to the preservation of the existing social order.

## POSTSCRIPT

### The Need for Further Research

I believe that this paper opens up areas for all sorts of further fruitful investigation. What I would like to do in this small addition to my paper is to suggest some further lines of research that might be pursued concerning sectarianism. Much more work needs to be done on the social roots and the functioning of sectarianism in specific areas of England in the Victorian period. The rich variety of social structures throughout England offers the historian many more situations as settings for its operation.

Here are some which occur to me at the moment, with some comments appended to them:

- (1) Towns which have a gross numerical preponderance of one denomination--though the indications from my paper are that numbers do not mean very much in the final analysis.
- (2) Towns with more diversified industries, and located in different regions of the country, (such as the West Riding of Yorkshire or the Midlands).
- (3) Towns which are located in an area of declining industry. My own work on the cloth region of Wiltshire indicates that sectarianism existed in a very different form here from that found in the four North-Western towns. In the region of Wiltshire it was just as vibrant a force as in the North, but its function is more in the line of being what Edward Thompson has called the chiasm of despair<sup>26</sup> among the common people. Church attendance was, interestingly enough, much higher in this area than in the Northern towns.
- (4) Non-industrial towns such as Bath might be examined. How does sectarianism function minus a proletariat? Again, I have done research in this area and the results are quite interesting.

(5) Work might also be done on purely agrarian areas. Such a study of one county is already well under way by a student at Columbia University.<sup>27</sup>

Local studies of this nature, I believe, no longer require justification. Social history and local history so often go hand in hand. The value of these studies for the broadening and enrichment of our knowledge of Victorian English society is enormous.

## NOTES

1. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (London, 1963), p. 807.
2. The regional considerations of Chartism's involvement in class conflict are revealed in Asa Briggs, Chartist Studies, (London, 1959).
3. After municipal incorporation in the eighteen-thirties, one ward of the new municipal borough, Heaton Norris, was actually in Lancashire. Stockport was really a Lancashire industrial town for all intents and purposes, with little to do with the rest of Cheshire.
4. J.L. and B. Hammond, The Age of Chartists, (London, 1930), p. 215.
5. J.O. Foster, "Nineteenth Century Towns--A Class Dimension", The Study of Urban History, (London, 1968), pp. 281-300.
6. The other towns studied by Foster in his Ph.D. thesis for Cambridge were Northampton in the Midlands and South Shields in the North-East.
7. About thirty-five percent of the entire male population of these towns was employed in cotton manufacturing.
8. Wage disputes, strikes, lock-outs, riots, protest meetings, etc.
9. Evidence must be pieced together from a variety of sources for the Church, the denominations and the sects. There were no detailed membership lists per se, with occupations, etc. for any religious group studied.
10. The Anglican elite in Preston seemed to be very tolerant toward Dissenters before 1835. This was probably because Dissent was so weak economically in the town.
11. The best sources for this are the Nonconformist registers at the Public Records Office. For a general survey of Nonconformist records, see Janet Smith, "The Local Records of Nonconformity", The Local Historian, Vol. VIII, No. 4, 1968.
12. A comparison between the census of Dissenting chapels in 1829 (when figures survive) and the figures for Dissent in the religious census of 1851 reveals this.
13. Benevolence in concrete forms such as the various societies instituted by chapels to cater to the downtrodden as well as the professed

attitude of certain leading Nonconformist manufacturers such as Henry Ashworth of Bolton toward the working classes.

14. Catholics in these towns made up, on average, fifteen per cent of the church-going population. In Preston it was closer to thirty per cent.
15. Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World's Religions", Essays, trans. Gerth and Mills, (London, 1947). Also see Ernest Troeltsch, The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, (London, 1931), pp. 331-343.
16. Secularism was very "religious" in its organization, having chapels, regularized ceremonies, etc.
17. Joseph Livesey, the leader of Preston Teetotalism, went into great detail at times to explain the various functions of the sect and its impact on local society. There is a very good passage in Ipswich Temperance Tract No. 133.
18. The attitude of individual chapels toward politics was important when it could be ascertained.
19. A. Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester (Leicester, 1954).
20. H.J. Hanham, Elections and Party Management, (London, 1959), p. 393, refers to Stockport's local politics.
21. The so-called "Puritan" flavour of some of the local regimes dominated by Dissenters was commented upon by many local historians --particularly in the case of Blackburn.
22. An expression used by the pro-Tory press.
23. These issues, of course, were prime material in stirring up controversy about the large Roman Catholic population in the town.
24. According to the political correspondence of George Melly, a Liberal candidate of the eighteen-sixties, the level of bribery in the town was extremely high through the first two-thirds of the century.
25. Preston Guardian, April 8, 1854.
26. E.P. Thompson, op. cit., Chapter XI, part ii.
27. James Obelkevich, "Religion and Rural Society in Lincolnshire, 1825-75", Columbia University, Ph. D. thesis in progress.