

CONDITIONS OF DEPENDENCE

WORKING-CLASS QUIESCENCE IN LANCASTER IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*

SUMMARY: This paper examines a town in northwest England and a particular set of conditions that inhibited the growth of working-class politics during the twentieth century. The paradox of class politics in Lancaster is that despite a proletarian population, the labour movement locally remained extremely weak. Ironically, it was only upon the deindustrialisation of the town in the later 1960s that labour showed any collective strength. Explanation of quiescence in terms of paternalism and deference is rejected. Rather an account is given in terms of powerlessness. Local structural conditions rendered Lancaster workers so highly dependent that resistance to political domination was precluded.

1. Introduction

In capitalist societies, workers, organised at a variety of levels, will, on occasion, present an overt, disruptive challenge to the established social order. Class struggles come and go in such a way that it would be inadvisable to assume that workers are either naturally rebellious or acquiescent. Rather, the specific structural conditions under which they labour and the concrete political situations in which they find themselves will affect their actions. Concern with the effects of different structural situations has inspired several of the more interesting of recent inquiries into labour mobilisation. An appreciation of increased regional and local variation in contemporary political behaviour has led some to claim that the working class should be analysed as a local rather than a national entity;¹ and recently a number of comparative studies have advanced our understanding local political differences in 20th-century Britain.²

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¹ E.g. J. Urry, "Deindustrialisation, Households and Politics", in L. Murgatroyd *et al.* (eds), *Localities, Class and Gender* (London, 1985), pp. 13–29.

² E.g. D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1886–1906* (Manchester, 1983); D. Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (London, 1984); M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics*

This paper examines one particular configuration of structural conditions in a political environment which inhibited the waging of working-class struggle in 20th-century Britain. Lancaster is a medium-sized town in Lancashire, north of the textile belt. Despite its continuous role as a regional service centre, it became heavily industrialised in the late 19th century. Thereafter a substantial factory proletariat emerged, largely semi- and un-skilled workers, employed primarily in the production of linoleum and, later, artificial fibres. The paradox of class politics in Lancaster is that despite its proletarian population, the labour movement remained extremely weak. In neither industrial nor electoral politics did labour have an impact commensurate with the character of the population. Ironically, it was only with the deindustrialisation of the town in the later 1960s that labour showed any collective strength. This paper tries to explain the relative quiescence of labour in Lancaster up to the 1960s.

There is an extensive literature explaining why the British working class was not revolutionary – in terms of incorporation, hegemonic domination, sectionalism, party-centredness, etc.³ Most take a long-term view, national in scope, of the origins of a reformist Labourism. Such literature gives little guide to a working class like Lancaster's, not even Labourist for most of the 20th century. Nor are studies of working-class Conservative voting, the source of most of our conceptions of the absence of labourism, easy to apply to the concrete practices which lead to localised working-class quiescence.⁴ In fact, probably the only elaborate analytic tool available for analysis of the absence of labour mobilisation is the paternalism/deference dialectic. This, however, has been subjected to an increasing level of criticism and, as section 3 shows, is largely unsatisfactory on both theoretical and empirical grounds.

The only competing paradigm for understanding quiescence derives from the work of Gaventa, who applied Lukes's analysis of power to the question of why miners in the Appalachian mountains, with strong reasons for discontent, did not engage in (or rather only very sporadically engaged in) class conflict.⁵ The cause, according to Gaventa, was their "sense of power-

(Cambridge, 1987), and H. Wainwright, *Labour: a Tale of Two Parties* (London, 1987), pp. 94–161.

³ Among recent works, F. Hearn, *Domination, Legitimation and Resistance: the Incorporation of the 19th Century English Working Class* (Westport, 1978); K. Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour: Shaping British Society 1850–1930* (London, 1980); E. Hobsbawm, "The Forward March of Labour Halted", in M. Jacques (ed.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London, 1978), pp. 1–19; J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: a History of the British Labour Movement, 1867–1974* (Brighton, 1983); J. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain 1918–1979* (Batsford, 1984), and R. Price, *Labour in British Society: an Interpretative History* (London, 1986).

⁴ E.g. E. Nordlinger, *The Working Class Tory* (London, 1965); R. McKenzie and A. Silver, *Angels in Marble* (London, 1967).

lessness". I shall argue that a modified version of this approach better accounts for quiescence.

Section 2 elaborates the paradox of Lancaster's politics, outlining the course of the town's political and industrial history. Section 3 criticises accounts of that history in terms of paternalism and deference and reflects on the concept of powerlessness. Section 4 considers the structural conditions which rendered Lancaster workers so highly dependent that resistance to political domination was inhibited. Section 5 offers some conclusions about the nature of dependence and powerlessness, arguing that it was only with the removal of the structural constraints to mobilisation that the period of worker quiescence came to an end.

2. *Lancaster politics in the 20th century*

The development of 20th-century politics in Lancaster falls into four phases:

- (1) the years to 1911, during which a nascent socialist movement mounted an unsuccessful challenge to a rather idiosyncratic Liberalism sponsored by the town's principal employer, Lord Ashton;
- (2) from 1911 to 1935 the Labour movement scarcely stirred in the context of a non-partisan, almost a-political, climate that served to entrench the established order;
- (3) between 1935 and the mid-1960s bi-partisan electoral politics developed, though Labour support remained at unexpectedly low levels and industrial conflict continued to be remarkable by its absence;
- (4) since the mid-1960s the local political culture has been transformed by the erosion of Conservative support, the growth of a more combative workplace politics and the expansion of sympathies for the "new" social movements.

Let us examine these four phases in more detail.

2.1 *From the late-19th century – 1911: a developing employers' hegemony*

At the turn of the century Lancaster was a fairly remote town, of 40,000 people, with a somewhat idiosyncratic proclivity for the Liberal Party; Pelling, discussing the Lancaster parliamentary constituency in elections between 1885 and 1910, concluded that "swings of national opinion were but little reflected".⁶ The Liberal candidate having lost unexpectedly in 1885, James Williamson (later Lord Ashton), the largest factory owner,

⁵ J. Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Oxford, 1980).

⁶ H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1886–1910* (London, 1967), p. 277.

replaced him and the Liberals won subsequently against the national tide. Retaining the seat in 1892, Williamson then retired in 1895, but his little-known successor as Liberal candidate was defeated. The Liberals subsequently chose another important local employer as candidate in 1900 – Helme, the owner of the third largest linoleum factory at Halton, three miles from Lancaster – and he won the next four elections. Lancaster's idiosyncracies are, then, tied in with support for local employers who were of Liberal persuasion in national politics.

Industrial employers were also very prominent in local politics, sharing key offices with members of the old professions and remnants of the local gentry. Thus Ashton, several members of the Storey family (also linoleum manufacturers), Helme and his wife, were mayors of the town before the First World War. Examination of the occupational backgrounds of local councillors in the pre-War period shows that the bourgeoisie was very prominent in formal politics locally. Virtually all councillors were self-employed and over one-third were either manufacturers, merchants or gentlemen (see Table 1).

Table 1
Occupational class distribution of persons elected to Lancaster Town Council 1871–1915 (percentages, N = 89)

Manufacturers	12.4
Merchants	11.2
Petite bourgeoisie	47.2
Retailing, etc.	24.7
Artisanal	21.4
(Building trades)	(10.2)
Farmers	1.1
Professionals	16.9
Higher	7.9
Lower	9.0
Gentlemen	10.1
White collar	1.1
Manual	1.1
Total	100.0

Source: Calculated from P. Gooderson, *The Social History of Lancaster 1780–1914* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Lancaster, 1975), p. 458.

These local notables were also important as civic benefactors in this period. Civic benevolence should not be confused with industrial paternalism. In many accounts unsubstantiated links are made between paternalism as a managerial strategy and the benevolence and participation of local notables in civic life. It is quite possible to make generous contributions to public facilities while not making any special provision for the welfare of employ-

ees. This was essentially what Ashton and the Storeys did in the pre-war period. Thus Ashton provided a new town hall and a large park. He contributed to many building projects, including a hospital and even the Trades Hall. Storeys contributed to a great range of good causes, as well as building an educational institute and giving large donations for hospital building. The ethos of provision seems to have been primarily one of charity: the big employers seemed positively to compete over the scale of their contributions.

Labour began to mount something of a political challenge from the turn of the century. This was not, however, based in the factories. There is no evidence of overt industrial conflict in Lancaster firms in this period. There were no strikes at the major works, despite the years prior to the First World War elsewhere in Britain being generally turbulent. Labour movement speakers, who exhorted Lancaster workers to unionise (Clynes, MP, spoke in this vein on more than one occasion) had no apparent success. The key personnel and the union supporters of the local Trades Council came from skilled trades or from firms whose owners were not local – notably the railway companies.

The story of conflicts between the employers and the labour movement in Lancaster is told in detail by Todd in an unpublished thesis.⁷ Todd shows that labour began to organise after 1890, with an ILP presence and the creation of a Trades Council. But these organisations soon subsided: “by the close of 1896 Lancaster’s first labour movement had as good as collapsed”. Indeed, Liberalism had a “strong hold on the consciousness of organised workers”.⁸ This was partly to be explained by the fact that most activists were skilled, unionised workers. Typically, Ashton recognised craft unions, the most prominent being the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, but prohibited unionisation of the unskilled. Todd also sees prosperity in the later 19th century, philanthropy and working-class owner-occupation, as factors making for the absence of labour organisation.

The Trades Council was re-established in 1900. Offering political support to Liberals in the first instance, it did consider co-operating with a revived ILP branch to form a Labour Representation Committee in 1905. The ensuing Joint Labour Committee, though providing a basis for contesting elections, lasted only until 1907. Neither the Trades Council or the ILP was very strong, though the latter had an active Women’s Labour League which supported the WSPU.

Confrontation with Ashton developed soon after. The year 1908 was somewhat tense, Ashton taking offence at a visiting SDF speaker who

⁷ N. Todd, “A History of Labour in Lancaster and Barrow-in-Furness c. 1890–1920” (unpublished MPhil. Thesis, University of Lancaster, 1976).

⁸ Todd, “A History of Labour in Lancaster”, p. 62.

allegedly referred to His Lordship as “a thief and a robber”. One sequence of events might stand as illustration of the nature of political relations, a sequence concerning the local response to a long article on Lancaster in *Co-operative News* in February 1909. A couple of columns devoted to Williamsons were mildly critical of the firm for paying low wages and of the labour force for not being organised into a trades union. The local response was remarkable. The President of the Lancaster and Skerton Co-operative Society, Jas. Moore, had two letters printed in reply in the *Co-operative News*. The first began:

Sir, You published an article in your last issue, which had given considerable annoyance to our Committee and many members, and which we consider to be in exceedingly bad taste, and calculated to injure our Society.

Moore then asked the paper to retract its criticisms of Ashton, but the editor’s reply claimed that there was nothing to retract since the account was both true and inoffensive. Meanwhile in Lancaster the local press took up the issue reporting the correspondence and publishing a very lengthy defence of Williamsons’ employment practices. (Much of the debate was about whether it was true to say that the standard labourer’s wage was 20s3d (£ 1.01) per week.) Also reported in the local press was an account of how workers in the Lune Road works had posted up notices around the factory proclaiming that Ashton was a good employer and how unfair were his critics. This particular mode of expression of loyalty to Ashton was fairly common in the years between 1905–1911, weighing as a factor in both industrial and political incidents and helping him to legitimate his actions.

This led to a split in the ILP between the more militant Wall, who was prepared to criticise Ashton, and Hodkinson, another major ILP activist, who was not. Ashton exploited this division and, in the context of disagreement in the ILP, he arranged personal meetings with Hodkinson to discuss political events. Todd claims that Ashton began to exploit a fear that he would use his economic power to seek retribution, a threat which, in the context of a severe trade recession in the town, led to considerable anger being expressed against socialists in the town.⁹

Labour’s challenge was most prominent in the realm of electoral politics. However, even though Lancaster had a Trades Council, and a Fabian and ILP presence, it offered only a limited challenge to a strongly entrenched local elite. Only one Labour councillor was elected before the outbreak of World War I – Jemison in 1907 – with the support of the Trades Council. The key event, however, was probably a local election in 1911 in the Skerton ward, where many of Ashton’s workers lived. William Wall had

⁹ Todd, *A History of Labour in Lancaster*, pp. 120–127.

contested Skerton on several occasions, without success. In 1911, despite Ashton publicly backing the other candidate, voting was tied – 472 votes each – and it was the casting vote of the returning officer which defeated Wall. Ashton was incensed. He sacked workers who were known members of the ILP. He wrote threatening letters to all his employees, saying that he would grant no raise in wages in such circumstances and would no longer keep workers on during strikes and periods of bad trade.¹⁰ Moreover, he determined to cease his civic largesse in response to the lack of gratitude of employees and citizens alike.

The effect was as desired. The Labour movement was badly affected. Unions ceased to recruit. The ILP, which had had 213 members in 1908, was reduced to 130 members in 1912. The Trades Council felt it necessary to apologise publicly to Ashton, which further entrenched splits in the organisation. As Todd put it, “if there was such a thing as a ‘Workers’ Rebellion’ in Lancaster then it was well and truly suppressed”.¹¹ Ashton won a major political victory. What is perhaps more interesting is how that balance of forces in Lancaster was sustained in the following years given the personal withdrawal of Ashton.

Ashton’s success in defeating Lancaster’s socialists was partly a result of the prevailing economic condition of the town. The only major manufacturing company other than in linoleum and table baize production – a carriage and wagon works – declined quickly after 1902 and finally closed in 1909. This was a severe blow to the local economy and left it dominated by the linoleum firms. Political victory was probably also aided by the role of Ashton as a civic benefactor. Many citizens benefited from his financial support of local hospitals and his provision of recreational facilities and of parts of the civic infrastructure. His was an important contribution to the daily problems of reproducing labour power.

The overall pattern established in the first decade of the century was one of a local political hegemony of the major industrial employers. Their factories were sites where their dominance was unchallenged. There was no overt industrial conflict. Production politics was characterised by an undecipherable mix of authoritarian control, paternalist self-justification and worker obeisance. Company provision for workers was limited, but a pattern of civic benevolence prevailed, with welfare facilities being voluntarily funded by the main employers for all local citizens. In this scene the employers were the principal political actors, standing at general elections, taking the mayoralty, influencing the press and generally dominating local politics.

¹⁰ *Lancaster Guardian*, 11 November 1911.

¹¹ Todd, *A History of Labour in Lancaster*, p. 127.

2.2. 1911–1935: a-political domination

The most distinctive feature of the period from 1911 through to the late-1930s was the absence of any active challenge from the Labour movement. The effects of Ashton's victory lived on after his withdrawal from local politics. The period after the war was one of deep political and industrial quiescence on the part of the Lancaster working class. For almost two decades, labour scarcely fought a local election. Apparently there came into being a convention in the town, to which the local Labour Party adhered, that a councillor standing for re-election would not be opposed by any other candidate. This led to some people sitting on the Council for half their life time without ever having to face a second electoral contest. Even the local newspaper was heard to complain about the lack of interest and involvement in municipal politics because of the infrequency of contests. That the Labour Party should accede in such an arrangement at a time when they had but two councillors suggests the weakness of the movement in Lancaster. The Council itself in this period is increasingly dominated by the petite bourgeoisie, as Table 2 shows. The numbers of large employers, professionals and "gentlemen" showed a significant decline compared to the pre-war period, a trend not unusual in British municipal politics, and there was some increase in the proportion of white-collar and manual employees.

Table 2
Occupational class distribution of persons elected to Lancaster Town Council for the first time between 1911–1935

	N	%
Owners, directors, merchants	5	10.6
Professionals	3	6.4
Petite bourgeoisie	24	51.1
Retailers	15	31.9
Artisanal (Building trades)	8 (3)	17.0 (6.4)
Farmers	1	2.1
White collar	5	10.6
Skilled manual	4	8.5
Housewives	3	6.4
Unknown	3	6.4
Total	47	100.0

Source: Calculated from A. E. Myall, *Changes in Social Control in Lancaster 1913–1938* (unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Lancaster), Appendix.

In terms of the party affiliation of councillors, Independents came to dominate. Whereas in the period before World War I candidates in the local elections pronounced themselves Liberal, Conservative or Independent in roughly equal proportions, as the inter-war period progressed all became Independents. Thus, the local paper reported the party composition of the Council in 1938 as being Independent 24, Labour 7, Tenants 1.

A further feature of the local political system in this period was the limited part that the local state played in the provision of services.¹² This partly followed from the role of the major employers as civic benefactors – they obviously provided some services which it would make no sense for the local authority to duplicate. However, that limited the control which the local population had over its own affairs. Dependence on the local elite in the reproduction of labour power was increased, while democratic participation was retarded. Expectations of the local authority were kept low and the need to organise to apply pressure was reduced. The practices of civic benevolence thus gave the benefactors an indirect control over the workforce by pre-empting public provision of services.

At General Elections between 1918 and 1935, Labour often put up a candidate (on five occasions out of a possible seven). Once, in 1922, there was a straight fight with a Conservative candidate, who had the backing of the local Liberal establishment, most notably Lord Ashton. In that election Fenner Brockway of the ILP got 32% of the votes. In the other similar contest in 1931, Labour obtained 24% of the vote. In the other cases there were three-cornered fights (in 1924, 1929, 1931 and 1935) and the Labour candidate obtained between 17% and 22% of the poll. These years saw a shift from Liberal to Conservative predominance: between 1885 and 1910 a Liberal was returned on six occasions out of eight, but between 1918 and 1935 the Conservatives won six times out of seven. Electoral support for the Conservative Party was thoroughly established during the inter-war period. Nevertheless, this seems to have been an a-political period: political partisanship, if not politics itself, was off the agenda. This was partly a function of the underdevelopment of a local party-system. The issues that arose tended to be treated in an administrative rather than a political mode. What debate there was appears to have pitted petit-bourgeois concerns against advocacy of rational and efficient administration. Lancaster continued to spend little money on human welfare provision: it was a comparatively mean authority in this period.¹³ It did, however, make considerable progress in the public provision of an urban infrastructure.

¹² See J. Mark-Lawson, M. Savage and A. Warde, "Women and Local Politics: Struggles over Welfare, 1918–1939", in L. Murgatroyd *et al.* (eds), *Localities, Class and Gender* (London, 1985), pp. 195–215.

¹³ See Mark-Lawson *et al.*, "Women and Local Politics", pp. 199–201.

This impression is confirmed by an appraisal of “modernisation” in Lancaster which appeared as a twenty-page supplement to the local newspaper in 1933. What the public officials contributing articles were proud of were predominantly hard, infrastructural facilities. They had built a bus station, cleared slums, widened roads and replaced trams with new buses, being extremely proud of their two double-deckers. They listed a new school, a new Central Library, extensions to the electricity supply, the water supply and the sewerage systems, as major improvements. The housing programme was mentioned. Also referred to was a series of privately funded developments – extensions to the Lancaster Royal Grammar School, to the Infirmary and to the Royal Albert Hospital among these. (Other private ventures were associated with firms – new offices for Williamsons, the building of the Nelson’s Silk factory, extensions to Waring and Gillow’s furniture factory, and a cinema.) Probably by 1933 the balance of such improvements was shifting towards the Council, and towards public expenditure, though this was not justified in terms of providing for the people, rather in terms of sound investment. The Borough Surveyor’s conclusion to his article on roads and town planning indicates one sort of basis for extended public involvement:

Town Planning is not the preparation of a scheme of public works which may increase local expenditure and taxation, but on the contrary, is a scheme which will now and in the future ensure economy and prevent unnecessary expenditure of public money.¹⁴

In the absence of labour movement and women’s movement pressure, the local state responded fairly directly to the interests of employers, in the earlier period by simply doing nothing, and in the later period by responding to the infrastructural needs of capital rather than inclining towards social provision for workers. Of course, this distinction is somewhat hard to draw. Housing is a case in point where clearly both workers and employers have an interest in adequate housing being available. It is interesting that when Morton Sundour were thinking of locating in Lancaster in the early 1920s one of their main reservations was the lack of adequate housing for their skilled workers. Subsequently the Lancaster Corporation’s housing programme seems to have been quite extensive. The progress of Council house building is summarised in Table 3. It can be seen that the Corporation was active, having built over 1700 council houses in the inter-war period. Along with a substantial number of privately built houses, mostly for owner-occupation, Lancaster had no housing shortage by the late 1930s. The only real problem remained housing for the very poor.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Lancaster Guardian Supplement*, 24 March 1933, p. 5.

Table 3
Houses built in Lancaster 1920–1939

<i>Year</i>	<i>Local authority</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Total</i>
1920	–	–	–
1921	7	9	16
1922	43	15	58
1923	–	8	8
1924	16	15	31
1925	72	30	102
1926	112	138	250
1927	252	128	380
1928	100	14	114
1929	170	41	211
1930	32	78	110
1931	–	133	133
1932	152	137	289
1933	150	309	459
1934	50	559	609
1935	109	351	460
1936	135	310	445
1937	42	407	449
1938	306	197	503
1939	–	474	474
Total	1748	3353	5101

Source: J. B. Cullingworth, *Housing in Transition; a Case Study in the City of Lancaster, 1958–1962* (London, 1962), p. 33.

It also has to be recognised that the local council took certain measures because it was required of them by central government. Indeed, the mass of the people of Lancaster were probably relatively well-served by central government edicts – though possibly they were also helped by the existence of a professional staff at the local level, for they certainly seemed to be unable to apply political pressure on their own behalf before 1935.

The key feature of industrial conflict in inter-war Lancaster was the low level of contestation by the workers in the main manufacturing industries. There were no major strikes in Lancaster at all, and most of the minor and infrequent skirmishes in the inter-war period were with peripheral groups in the local economy – engineers, building workers and railwaymen. The General Strike was indicative of local circumstances, with only the railwaymen and the woodworkers (in the large furniture factory) firmly supporting the action.

¹⁵ See J. B. Cullingworth, *Housing in Transition: a Case Study in the City of Lancaster, 1958–1962* (London, 1962), pp. 20–34.

Lancaster, in fact, developed a reputation for being a place where workers gave no “trouble”. Visiting trade unionists and northwest-area union organisers frequently commented on low levels of unionisation and the correspondingly low wages in the town. The local Council, in trying to attract new employers to the area, made very similar points! So did the local employers themselves: a typical proclamation was that of Seddon in 1933: “I know of no more efficient, harder working or adaptable operatives than can be procured in Lancaster.”¹⁶

The period from 1911–1935 can best be characterised in terms of its a-political nature, years during which labour organisations have almost no perceptible impact in the industrial or political spheres. The local Council operated in largely non-partisan fashion under petit-bourgeois guidance, while the policy outputs of the local state consist of administrative regulation of modernisation of the municipal infrastructure. This scenario presumably appealed to larger employers since several new enterprises located in the town in the 1920s and early 1930s, almost certainly because of the town’s reputation for its disciplined workforce.

2.3. 1935 – late 1960s: partisanship and working-class Conservatism

A shift in local politics in Lancaster began to take place in the late thirties. The Labour Party began to pick up electoral support after intervening in disputes over housing in 1935–1937. In local elections after 1945 Labour began to win more seats than any of the other groupings, but not a majority. This impelled the incumbent Councillors to further develop party organisation and, often with expressed reluctance, former Independents began to fight under Conservative auspices after the Second World War.

At the same time, the remaining Independents, Liberals and Conservatives in local politics formed an anti-socialist front which kept Labour from controlling the local authority until 1958. Labour lost that majority in 1959, regained it in 1963, lost it again in 1964, recovering it again only in 1972, the last year before Local Government Reorganisation.

Labour began to make an impact over what would now be called “consumption issues”. As Savage has shown, the bases of Labour Party support and mobilisation are often not in the industrial politics of the trades unions but rather over issues of welfare services.¹⁷ A rather odd issue arose in the later 1930s over municipal housing.

It was to the Labour Party that council tenants turned to express discontent at the implementation of a scheme of “differential” rents, made possible by legislation in 1930 but introduced in the wake of a 1935 Housing

¹⁶ *Lancaster Observer*, 3 February 1933.

¹⁷ Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics*, pp. 20–38.

Act, designed to reduce overcrowding in local authority accommodation. It appears that councils were required to estimate an “economic rent” for each house on any given estate, and then to recoup in rent the total sum for that estate. To achieve this tenants were to pay rents according to household income (subject to certain maxima and minima), the better off contributing more than the poor. This meant that large, but poor, households could have accommodation of sufficient size to alleviate overcrowding and they would, in effect, be subsidised by their fellow tenants.

In Lancaster this policy seems to have been introduced on one estate (Marsh) in 1936 and extended, without debate by the Housing Committee, to others during 1938. The absence of discussion led later to some Labour Party councillors having to apologise profusely for their oversight. Tenants disliked the scheme for several reasons. It caused friction between neighbours who were paying markedly different rents for identical property. It was argued that egalitarian schemes like these should be the responsibility of the whole nation or all Lancastrians, not of single housing estates. And it was severely attacked on the grounds of invasion of privacy. Having the local authority investigate household income was much resented, particularly the practice of asking employers to give information on weekly earnings.

Mobilisation against the scheme was extensive. Meetings were held to form tenants’ associations on most of the estates: Marsh already had an association, but Newton, Beaumont and Ryelands all organised during September 1938. Local councillors were invited to these meetings and it was clear that tenants expected redress through Labour members in particular. Fiery rhetoric, including threats of rent strikes, was endorsed in these meetings. A speech by Bangert, secretary of the Newton Tenants’ Association, attempting to rouse opposition on his estate, was reported in the local paper. Among other things, he pointed out anomalies in the working of the schemes. He attacked the Housing Manageress, Miss Baynes, who “has an insidious method set up whereby your private affairs are being enquired into”. He berated the Council for allowing the scheme to go through:

Had the Council as a whole been doing their jobs as they should have done, this position would not have arisen. (Hear, hear). There would have been no cause for this meeting, because it would have been tackled in the Council [. . .]

He announced that, “I would lead a rent strike on this estate in order to beat this system. (Loud applause).” And he outlined the social consequences of the scheme:

I have seen quite sufficient on the Marsh Estate: we do not want it introduced on our own estate, because on the Marsh you have one woman spitting in another woman's face because one is paying 6s a week rent and the other 9s a week. (Applause). No-one who knows the psychology of the working-class would ever want to break any organisation by ruling and dividing, and she [Miss Baynes] knows it well. She knows there is no better weapon for bringing this about than having one with 3s rent, another with 6s rent, a third with 9s and a fourth with 12s. What is the net result? Day in and day out the individual paying 6s rent carping with the individual paying 9s a week, and at every possible turn you have antagonism and bitterness from one end of the estate to the other [. . .]¹⁸

A series of meetings of this kind exhorted councillors to contest the decision and have it rescinded. However, the local Labour councillors were reluctant. One (Bell) thought the scheme a good idea and tried to dissuade the tenants from opposition, which did not make him popular. Another (Crosse) agreed to oppose the scheme because the tenants wanted him to, but was personally ambivalent. The leader of the local Labour Party (Dirkin) simply opposed the tenants, arousing some hostility at a Labour Party meeting on the subject on 12 September 1938.

The issue was resurrected at a Council meeting at the end of September. The motion to alter the policy failed because there was no-one to second the Independent councillor (Seed) who raised the issue. This resulted in a large meeting of 1500 tenants from all the estates, held in the Ashton Hall on 18 October, addressed by Morris of the Civic League in Leeds (where the same systems had been being contested for four years) as well as local tenants' leaders. The meeting resolved to put up Tenants' Association candidates in the forthcoming local elections. Of the two candidates, one in Skerton East (containing Newton and Beaumont estates) won easily, beating a Socialist into second place and the unfortunate Seed (Independent). In a third contest in Skerton West an Independent with the support of the Ryelands Tenants' Association beat Fyfe (Socialist).

In the short run, it would seem that Labour aroused opposition from tenants. Significantly, Labour did not lose votes to the Conservatives. This suggests, as did some of the rhetoric at tenants' meetings, that there was already an identification between tenants and the Labour Party and that these were struggles between the Party and some of its erstwhile supporters over consumption issues.

In General Elections Labour also improved its performance, but was unable to make the kind of impact that might have been anticipated in the Lancaster constituency. In 1945, when Labour achieved its first large majority nationally, the Conservative candidate in Lancaster obtained a majority of 7700. Labour was a long way short in subsequent elections and it

¹⁸ *Lancaster Guardian*, 2 September 1938.

was only in 1966 that the seat was won, by Stanley Henig, for Labour. This election (at which Labour nationally achieved its second largest ever parliamentary majority) was the only occasion on which the Conservatives failed to win Lancaster between 1923 and 1987.

The effect of the growth of Labour support after 1935 was to consolidate at a greater rate Conservative partisanship. One distinctive feature of Lancaster was the level of Conservative support given the class composition of the electorate. Piepe *et al.* show that the constituency was one of the most glaring anomalies to the British pattern of class-party alignment throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In 1955, for instance, the Conservatives took 11% more of the vote than would have been predicted on the basis of the class composition of the city, making Lancaster the most deviant, pro-Conservative constituency in Britain.¹⁹ Their analysis was based on the proportions of heads of household in Social Classes IV and V (semi- and unskilled), groupings who, because of the nature of the labour processes in Lancaster manufacturing industry, were much in evidence. It was precisely these classes which were most dependent on the local employers, though of course we cannot be sure that these men were the source of Conservative support. Indeed, Martin and Fryer suggest that skilled manual workers were stronger Tory supporters, but they were relatively few.²⁰

A second distinctive, and new, aspect of electoral politics in Lancaster was the high rate of participation. Moser and Scott's analysis of the larger towns of Britain in the 1950s showed that Lancaster had the third highest turnout in local elections of the 157 towns with a population above 50,000.²¹ The a-political climate of the inter-war period had clearly given way to a much more active, participatory era, but one which favoured the Conservative party. The same study showed that the left vote in the town in the 1951 and 1955 General Elections was relatively low. Since Lancaster, unlike some other Lancashire towns, had never fostered a 19th-century popular Toryism, the creation of that level of Conservative partisanship requires explanation.

Industrial politics was even less favourable terrain for the labour movement in this period. Semi-skilled and unskilled labour in the main firms remained non-unionised until the 1960s. Trade unionists from outside the town continued to bemoan the lack of consciousness and organisation of the workforce. A typical incident concerned an attempt to obtain union recognition at Nelsons in 1938, which caused one of the few strikes to occur in the

¹⁹ A. Piepe *et al.*, "The Location of the Proletarian and Deferential Worker", *Sociology*, 3 (1969), pp. 239-244.

²⁰ R. Martin and R. H. Fryer, *Redundancy and Paternalist Capitalism: a Study in the Sociology of Work* (London, 1973).

²¹ C. A. Moser and W. Scott, *British Towns: a Statistical Survey of Social and Economic Differences* (Edinburgh, 1961).

manufacturing industries of the town in the first half of the century. The report that Councillor L. Oakes, President of the National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers, gave to the Lancaster Trades and Labour Council of the events can stand as a cameo of the state of trade-union consciousness in the town. In 1936 he was invited to try to organise a union branch in Nelsons, which he did by making some demands of management. Apart from asking for an increase in wages, it was requested that protective clothing should be provided and that overtime work should be paid at overtime, rather than ordinary, rates. The reply from the management was merely that there was no need for higher wages because the cost of living was lower in Lancaster than in other parts of the Northwest and Midlands. However, not much later, management did introduce a bonus scheme which had the effect of increasing wages by about a penny in the shilling (8%) for workers, but at the same time introduced a penalty for bad work – so whether workers were much better off was not entirely clear. Among the features of the labour contract at Nelsons that Oakes commented derisively upon was the fact that “men, doing the same job, were receiving different rates of pay, varying from 1s2d to 3d per hour”.

What eventually precipitated the strike was the demand for negotiating rights for the union. Oakes recalled that in over two years of trying to represent the workers at Nelsons he had only once been granted an interview by the management, implacably hostile to recognising the union. Apparently arrangements were made for men to go on strike over this issue – the strike having been canvassed, and there being considerable promises of support. Oakes said that he had thought it most unlikely that the men would go out on the agreed day, and he turned up at the works expecting nothing to happen. He claimed to be most “surprised” and “pleased” that the strike ever occurred. It was not successful. The men picketed peaceably but could not prevent quite rapid dilution of support. Oakes claimed that the employers put undue pressure on the families of strikers, refused to talk under any circumstances, rejected requests for arbitration by the Ministry of Labour, and suggested that strikers would have to return to work soon if they hoped to get their jobs back. In any case, if they wanted to keep their jobs they would have to make personal applications to the management before they would be re-employed. Oakes reflected on the defeat:

We knew this sort of thing would happen and, unfortunately, our people were not strong enough to carry through the dispute [. . .] We have simply to make up our minds that there is a great need for Trade Union recruitment and education, not only in textiles, but in every other industry in this locality, and some of us have to get down to the job. (Hear, hear).²²

²² *Lancaster Guardian*, 14 July 1939.

Further on in his address he is reported as saying:

It is time the people of Lancaster woke up and remedied the conditions, and the only way to do that was to get strong Union representation.

We should not blind our eyes to the fact that some of these people bring their factories to this area, not because they want cheap water, cheap electricity, or cheap gas, but because they want to exploit a tradition of cheap labour – a tradition attached to this City which has got to be swept away or other [sic]. (Hear, hear).²³

Such judgments were typical of those made by labour movement activists throughout the inter-war period, the workers of Lancaster being no more amenable to unionisation in 1939 than they had been in 1918. In fact, a week later the newspaper contained two readers' letters replying to the rather lengthy article from which I have been quoting, one suggesting that Oakes was an outside agitator up to no good, and the other proclaiming loyalty to the employer whose good offices led to jobs being available in the firm in the first place.

While the attempt to get recognition showed greater consciousness than had been the case in the earlier periods, the outcome indicated the frailty of the labour challenge in Lancaster.

Virtually no industrial action was recorded between 1935 and 1964 in Lancaster. Only on one occasion did process workers in the manufacturing firms take any kind of action: 200 spinners at the Cellulose Acetate Silk Co. went on strike over pay and conditions in 1937. All other action recorded in the local press, and there was very little of it, involved workers who either were employed by supra-local enterprises or were in craft unions. Thus, the busmen and the railwaymen took action occasionally; male nurses at the Moor hospital (an asylum) threatened to strike in 1948 and 1952, and operated an overtime ban in 1956; Waring and Gillow, furniture makers, experienced a five-day unofficial strike in 1960; and there was some, but qualified, local participation in the national engineering strike in 1953. The climate of industrial relations in Lancaster in the thirty years under consideration was highly favourable to the employers. Things changed markedly in the late 1960s after the general unions, the TGWU in particular, had succeeded in unionising the non-skilled workers in the manufacturing companies. But it is a remarkable reflection on the local Labour movement that the Trades Council was dominated by USDAW from 1951–1971.

²³ *Ibid.*

2.4. *After the mid-1960s: radicalisation*

In the last twenty years the political culture of Lancaster had undergone a significant transformation. The character of contemporary politics is not a central issue in this paper.²⁴ Rather I want merely to show that the distinctiveness of the town evaporated as its excessive Conservatism subsided and industrial conflict became more intense. It is rather ironic that it was precisely in the period of deindustrialisation, as the factory proletariat was being obliterated, that a more radical politics emerged. The bearers of the new politics were public sector workers, often welfare professionals, who supported labour organisations and social movements.

The Lancaster constituency has taken in increasing chunks of the rural hinterland in the process of boundary revisions since the 1960s. Consequently, Labour candidates failed to win the seat. But in the old Borough of Lancaster itself there has been a tendency for Labour to gain support. When Savage repeated the analysis of Piepe *et al.* (see above) for the 1983 General Election, he found that Labour got *more* support in Lancaster than would be anticipated by using a national class-party model of voting behaviour.²⁵ In other words, Lancaster had swung from being a working-class town giving the Conservatives undue support to being a middle-class town giving excessive support to Labour. This trend continued at the 1987 election, when there was a swing to Labour of some 5%, well above both the national and the regional average.

Boundary changes complicate the analysis of local electoral behaviour. Before local government reorganisation in 1974 Labour had begun to make up ground, winning a “landslide” victory in the 1971 elections and doing sufficiently well in 1972 to give them a majority on the Council once again. The effect of reorganisation was that the Lancaster CB wards became a relatively small part of a much enlarged District Authority. The new District included Morecambe and a range of rural districts in the Lune Valley and around Morecambe Bay. Of the sixty seats on the new District Council, only twenty-one covered the old urban core of Lancaster. Morecambe was staunchly Conservative, being represented by a Conservative MP continuously since 1906, and having a local Council composed of Conservatives and Independents with very little opposition from Labour or Liberals. The new rural areas, were, perhaps, even more Conservative than Morecambe. The new District Council, then, when it was first constituted

²⁴ See J. Mark-Lawson and A. Warde, “Industrial Restructuring and the Transformation of a Local Political Environment: A Case Study of Lancaster”, *Lancaster Regionalism Group Working Paper No. 33* (University of Lancaster, 1987).

²⁵ M. Savage, “Understanding Political Alignments in Contemporary Britain: Do Localities Matter?”, *Political Geography Quarterly*, 6 (1987), pp. 53–76; Piepe *et al.*, “The Location of the Proletarian and Deferential Worker”.

by elections held in 1973, surfaced with a very comfortable Conservative majority.

The Conservatives retained a substantial absolute majority on the new District council in the three subsequent elections (1976, 1979 and 1983) but in 1987, were deprived of their absolute majority, losing nine seats overall, Labour gaining six on aggregate, the Alliance three. This went against the general trend of local elections in 1987 – Lancaster was one of the few places where Conservative control was eradicated on the basis of a significant shift to Labour. It is worth examining more closely the origins of the 1987 result in the context of the history of Labour partisanship in Lancaster City.

Table 4
District Council: seats by party in old boundaries of Lancaster CB

	1973	1976	1979	1983	1987
Conservative	10	13	8	7	4
Labour	11	8	10	11	14
Alliance	–	–	–	3	3
Others	–	–	3	–	–

If we look only at the wards in Lancaster City in the period after Reorganisation we can see a tendency for Labour to continue the rise, begun in 1971, attributable to changes in the industrial, occupational and class structure of the City. Table 4 shows the number of seats won by the different parties in the old area of Lancaster City from 1973–1987. What is most evident is a tendency for the Conservatives gradually to lose support. 1976 was a year in which the Conservative Party nationally did well in local elections. But allowing for this, there seem to be signs of a steady erosion of Conservative support, to the point where only four seats were won in 1987. The Conservative losses have largely been of benefit to the Labour Party, which would, on the old boundaries, have had an absolute majority in both 1983 and 1987. Third party representation within the City has been notably volatile. These results suggest that the dominance of Conservative partisanship which had characterised the city until the end of the 1960s was more-or-less completely eroded by the late 1980s. If places have political traditions or political cultures, then Lancaster City offers a case study of the processes whereby one tradition or culture is replaced by another.

It is perhaps more instructive in attempting to disarticulate these changes to look at the share of the vote rather than merely at the number of seats won. Table 5 shows the percentage of the vote obtained by the parties inside the old City of Lancaster boundaries at the five elections since Reorga-

nisation. It confirms powerfully the proposition that there has been a collapse of Conservative domination among the electorate. It is notable that Labour got a larger percentage of the vote in *all* the elections, even in the bad year of 1976, than did the Conservatives.²⁶ This, to some extent, reflects the fact that the Conservatives on occasion have declined to contest one or two seats in Skerton Central, whereas Labour declined to contest but one. The declining popularity of the Conservatives has not, however, entailed a marked increase in Labour support. The best year for Labour nationally was 1973, and never since has the Labour Party got such a large proportion of the votes (54%). Labour lost support during the 1970s – though it is interesting to note that in 1979, when General and Local elections were held on the same day, that Labour was a few percentage points ahead of the Conservatives in the City, but way adrift in the Constituency (16% behind the Conservatives). Labour since 1979 has built up its share of the vote – reaching 49% in 1987 – but much of the support lost by the Tories has gone to the Alliance. Alliance and Independents took over 25% of the vote in 1987 and just under 25% in 1983. What we are obliged to conclude is that there is a growing anti-conservative sentiment in Lancaster City rather than a substantial efflorescence of Labourism. Nonetheless, the fact that Labour almost got a majority of the votes in 1987 is a sign of well-entrenched Labour support in the context of a three-party system. The same trend against the Conservatives can be observed on the District Council as a whole.

Table 5
District Council: total vote and percentage of vote by party in old boundaries of Lancaster CB

	1973	1976	1979	1983	1987
Conservative	18,111 45.1%	17,482 46.6%	24,167 39.6%	12,524 29.3%	11,174 24.6%
Labour	21,450 53.5%	17,918 47.7%	26,790 43.9%	19,633 46.1%	22,321 49.0%
Alliance and others	553 1.4%	2,136 5.7%	10,021 16.4%	10,474 24.6%	12,012 26.4%

The bases of these changes are difficult to decipher. Declining Conservative partisanship probably had some connection to changes in the character of industrial relations. The big manufacturing employers – Williamsons and,

²⁶ This, to some extent, reflects the fact that the Conservatives on occasion have declined to contest one or two seats in Skerton Central, whereas Labour declined to contest but one.

especially, Storeys – saw their non-skilled workers become unionised and their whole labour forces finally beginning to take industrial action. A strike by engineers at Williamsons in 1964, which spread to other groups, was the first major episode of conflict in the firm. From 1967 onwards Storeys experienced a succession of strikes by engineers (1967, 1971), electricians (1967) and process workers (1968, 1973, 1976 and 1977). Lansils (formerly the Cellulose Acetate Silk Co., but then owned by Monsanto) had a three-week mass strike over pay and a closed shop in 1969. At Nelsons, engineers struck in 1970 and there were a series of disputes in 1975.

Conflict was also occurring in other kinds of enterprises in the area at this time: assorted groups of public employees took action; and the building of the first nuclear power station at Heysham was notoriously strike-prone. In many respects, in line with national trends, Lancaster's labour force was combative in the years between 1967 and 1979. Participation in industrial conflict was probably one basis for declining Conservative support among Lancaster workers, though in fact this was probably less significant than the growth of public sector employment in the town during the 1960s.

The processes of restructuring of manufacturing industry in Lancaster which induced early deindustrialisation in the town have been extensively reported elsewhere.²⁷ The main trends were the growth of external ownership and subsequent rationalisation and closure by the early 1980s of most of the manufacturing capacity in the town. Health and education services became the two main sources of employment locally. The building of two nuclear power stations at Heysham provided large numbers of temporary jobs (at its height during the construction period Heysham Two station had 6000 employees on site). Once in operation much less employment was available, but the Central Electricity Generating Board remains a major employer. The other mainstays of the local economy are in consumer services – retailing and tourism – and a new, small firms sector. The overall impact of these changes was to change the nature of the local labour market, to alter the nature of the labour processes and to sharply increase the importance of employment in public agencies. The result has been to alter the social bases of political action in the town.

²⁷ See L. Murgatroyd, "Deindustrialisation in Lancaster", *Lancaster Regionalism Group Working Paper No. 1* (University of Lancaster, 1981); P. Bagguley, J. Mark-Lawson, D. Shapiro, J. Urry, S. Walby and A. Warde, *Restructuring: Place, Class and Gender* (London, 1990).

3. *Interpreting quiescence in Lancaster*

3.1. *Paternalism/deference*

Explanations of quiescence, since the publication of Lockwood's famous essay "Sources of Variation in Working Class Images of Society" have tended to be in terms of deference.²⁸ And it has proved particularly tempting to sociologists to attribute quiescence to deference where it is possible to identify local powerful figures who might be deemed paternalists. It is then perhaps unsurprising that existing accounts of Lancaster workers usually rely on paternalism and deference to account for quiescence.²⁹ The most accessible analysis, that of Martin and Fryer, is fairly typical. Martin and Fryer studied the first major bout of redundancies at Williamsons (Casterton Mills), the largest manufacturing enterprise in Lancaster, in 1967 and they give a résumé of the history of the town as well as reporting on questionnaire responses of redundant workers. Asserting that the town "sustained a complex structure of paternalist capitalism" that was "characterised by authoritarianism, tempered with generosity, on the part of the mills, and deference, tinged with resentment, on the part of the employed",³⁰ they proceeded to argue almost entirely in terms of paternalism and deference. Authoritarianism and resentment disappeared. Quiescence was deemed the outcome of some benevolent acts of the Williamson family *at the turn of the century*,³¹ and a grateful band of workers who adopted an acquiescent and respectful conservatism. They claim that "a pattern of political influence, and the political culture which helped to sustain it, survived at least until the Second World War, and in some respects still survives".³² This political culture was identified through local electoral behaviour and the surprisingly small number of, especially skilled, manual workers who professed in interview to being consistent Labour-party supporters. In fact, as Urry showed, the evidence of the survey does not establish that the workers were deferential;³³ and nor does evidence of industrialists' practice confirm the widespread use of paternalist strategies.

²⁸ D. Lockwood, "Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society", *Sociological Review*, 14 (1966), pp. 249–267.

²⁹ See Martin and Fryer, *Redundancy and Paternalist Capitalism*, pp. 26–47; P. Gooderson, "The Social History of Lancaster 1780–1914" (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Lancaster, 1975), p. 370; A. E. Myall, *Changes in Social Control in Lancaster 1913–38* (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Lancaster, 1976), pp. 6–15.

³⁰ Martin and Fryer, *Redundancy and Paternalist Capitalism*, p. 26.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³³ J. Urry, "Paternalism, Management and Localities", *Lancaster Regionalism Group Working Paper No. 2* (University of Lancaster, 1980).

There is considerable doubt as to the applicability of the deferential dialectic in the case of Lancaster.

Despite being regularly invoked, there have been many reservations about the deferential dialectic. Generally it is argued that the concept of paternalism is incoherent and over-extended; and that, empirically, deference is highly qualified, partial and infrequent in its incidence.

First, the term paternalism is marked by its imprecise usage, a variety of distinctions often being overlooked:

(1) It is necessary to distinguish paternalism as an industrial strategy from paternalism as a political strategy. A number of authors have made a good case for considering paternalism as a managerial strategy, as a means of maintaining control at work.³⁴ Paternalism as a political strategy is, however, much less easy to identify. Local, municipal patronage was a prominent feature of 19th-century urban politics, but what I will call “civic benevolence” is only exceptionally and indirectly directed towards control at work. Empirically it is not the case that it was the same employers who provided facilities for both their own employees and for local citizens; strategically it is not the case that civic benevolence is a substitute for industrial paternalism.

(2) It is important also to recognise different styles of industrial paternalism, at the least to distinguish liberal, benevolent and sometimes populist forms from authoritarian, often moralistic, disciplinarian sorts. This difference, a dynamic tension at the core of the root metaphor of a “paternal relation”, cross-cuts a third important distinction between personal and corporate forms.

(3) There is a significant difference in the logic of the operation of power between personal and corporate forms of industrial paternalism. The personal entails face-to-face relationships, personal obligation and indulgence and might be said to rest on a type of traditional authority. The corporate entails more negotiated exchange of benefits, welfare provision becomes part of the employment contract, the paternalist relationship becomes an institutionalised and routinised exchange, still of course conferring power on the employer, but of a more rational-legal kind. Failure to recognise this distinction has led to some historical accounts dating the end of paternalism as a strategy in the UK at the outbreak of the First World War,³⁵ while analysts from industrial-relations backgrounds see it as a principal feature of monopoly capitalism in the inter-war period.³⁶

³⁴ G. Norris, “Industrial Paternalism, Capitalism and Local Labour Markets”, *Sociology*, 12 (1978), pp. 469–489; Urry, “Paternalism, Management and Localities”, pp. 18–22.

³⁵ P. Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: the Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton, 1980), pp. 331–340; Price, *Labour in British Society*, pp. 93–94.

³⁶ E.g. C. Littler, “A Comparative Analysis of Managerial Structures and Strategies”, in H. Gospel and C. Littler (eds), *Managerial Strategies and Industrial Relations: a Histori-*

Second, the literature also disagrees as to the conditions that support paternalism. This partly results from the imprecise definition of the concept, partly from a tendency to assume that paternalist practices are unequivocally beneficial for workers. It was thus salutary of Melling to have pointed to the variety of reasons for the involvement of employers in house-building on Clydeside at the turn of the century, and to have made links between involvement and problems of control and recruitment within the firm.³⁷ Additionally, the excellent article of Norris manages to analyse systematically the conditions under which industrial paternalism flourishes, though because he excludes modern large-company welfare provision from the category of paternalism (he sees it as normal, economically-rational behaviour and hence not within the scope of paternalism) he does not give much help in understanding 20th-century practices.³⁸

Finally, serious analysis of the effects of the implementation of industrial paternalist strategies is lacking. It is generally presumed that paternalism results in worker obeisance so that few analyse either the sources of discontent,³⁹ or the modes of resistance, to which it gives rise. But probably the most important misperception of the effects of industrial paternalism lies in the presumption that it will have identical effects on workers' wider political affiliations as it does on their behaviour in the workplace. This is to draw too simple a parallel between workplace relations and wider political commitment. This point is recognised in the most authoritative recent exposition of the deferential dialectic.

Newby argued that among his sample of East Anglian agricultural labourers deference was not a unified, deeply held set of attitudes of broad significance in social and political life, but rather a situational response, behaviour systematically deployed when required.⁴⁰ This way of approaching deference is corroborated by the failure of various surveys to uncover instances of consistent deferential images of society, as was postulated by Lockwood,⁴¹ or of widespread diffusion of deferential attitudes.⁴² These considerations lead to the surmise that workers have been attributed deferential political orientations largely because they do not engage in open class conflict. Newby's comments, in the conclusion to his *Deferential Worker*, about farm labourers may be even more true of some industrial workers:

cal and Comparative Study (London, 1983).

³⁷ J. Melling, "Employers, Industrial Housing and the Evolution of Company Welfare Policies in Britain's Heavy Industry: West Scotland 1870–1920", *International Review of Social History*, XXVI (1981), pp. 255–301.

³⁸ Norris, "Industrial Paternalism, Capitalism and Local Labour Markets".

³⁹ Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics*, is an exception.

⁴⁰ H. Newby, *The Deferential Worker* (Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 414–440.

⁴¹ Lockwood, "Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society", pp. 252–255.

⁴² E.g. K. Roberts *et al.*, *The Fragmentary Class Structure* (London, 1977), pp. 44–49.

only a small proportion of agricultural workers can be considered as deferential workers in the sense that they adhere to a reasonably consistent deferential image of society. The deference which is often attributed to the agricultural worker can therefore be seen to rest largely upon a fallacious inference made from his largely quiescent social and political behaviour. This quiescence, however, must be seen to result from the agricultural worker's dependence rather than from his deference. The dependence of the agricultural worker upon the farmer for employment, and in many cases for housing in addition, militates against the overt expression of dissatisfaction, except in the most individualistic and negative of ways, like the move to another job.⁴³

It is my contention that quiescence of much industrial labour emanated from dependence rather than deference. The generally unsatisfactory nature of the deferential dialectic as explanation makes it worth examining power relations in a different vein.

3.2. *Powerlessness*

The problem of accounting for quiescence is considerable, it always being difficult to explain something that never happened – in this case the emergence of organised working-class opposition against the power of private property owners. Yet any sophisticated understanding of the operation of power requires that we address such a question. It was Lukes who argued the case for a systematic consideration of the way in which power may be being exercised without there being any apparent conflict.⁴⁴ The silence of the oppressed must not be read as an expression of consent. Equally, we should not merely assume that the absence of dissent among subordinate groups is evidence of suppression or manipulation by more powerful groups. The problem that Lukes set himself was to demonstrate the existence of processes which would alter the consciousness of subordinates in order to account for the absence of overt conflict. The most sophisticated attempt to apply Lukes' theoretical propositions about three-dimensional power lies in Gaventa's examination of a case where the absence of resistance was very surprising – among miners in central Appalachia.⁴⁵

Gaventa sought to explain quiescence in terms of powerlessness. He investigated a number of episodes of conflict which served to establish and subsequently maintain the quiescence of the local subordinate classes despite glaring social inequalities. He isolated a series of processes – political, economic and ideological – that combined in practice to contain and avert

⁴³ Newby, *The Deferential Worker*, p. 414.

⁴⁴ S. Lukes, *Power: a Radical View* (London, 1974), p. 23.

⁴⁵ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*.

conflict. Violence and threats of violence, dependence on local employers for welfare provision and housing as well as jobs, the networks of a unified local elite, a near monopoly of land ownership by the mining company which prevented alternative sources of survival (either the arrival of new employers or a return to peasant farming), state and legal intervention on behalf of the coal owners, elite influence in religion and education – all were significant in rendering the subordinate classes powerless and maintaining their subordination. These conditions gave rise to what Gaventa called the *unitary power* of capital. This increased the capacity of the elite to inflict political defeats upon rebellious, subordinate groups; and those political defeats, when they occurred, further emphasised the powerlessness of the subordinate groups, discouraging potential future opposition. It was a kind of recursive process – weak capacity for resistance, led to defeat, which in turn reduced the capacity for subsequent resistance.

The crux of Gaventa's account of Middlesboro and Clairborne County was the local system of *unitary power*. Effectively, the American Association Ltd. of London controlled access to virtually all the resources required for the miners to survive. A company monopoly of land, employment, social institutions, retail outlets, communications, channels of legal redress, etc., unsurprisingly facilitated political domination also. Heuristically, the case of the Appalachian miners must be considered extreme, more common in under-developed than in modern capitalist societies,⁴⁶ but nonetheless at one end of a continuum between unitary and fragmentary systems of local power. The system of unitary power was based upon a

[. . .] nexus between the job and the community. A worker in the coal camp was reminded of that nexus every two weeks when he received his payslip, for from his wages were docked rent, services, goods purchased at the store, medical bills, even funeral expenses – all by the same employer. The slip symbolically fused the miner's dependence as worker, tenant, consumer and citizen. This unitary structure meant that power exercised in one part of the system could evoke a response in another: misbehaviour in the job could cause the loss of a home; failure to shop at the company store (where prices were often higher) could mean the loss of work; disobedience of a single rule could mean eviction from the game altogether.⁴⁷

The most obvious objection to an explanation of quiescence in terms of powerlessness is that it is circular. However, if it is possible to isolate mechanisms or institutional arrangements that render workers especially weak then the circularity evaporates. Gaventa does isolate sufficient causes

⁴⁶ See M. Burawoy, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism* (London, 1985), pp. 209–252.

⁴⁷ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, p. 89.

of impotence. However, he wants to go further, in accordance with the methodological injunctions of Lukes, to show how the exercise of power affected consciousness, to demonstrate a “sense of powerlessness”. Though desirable, this is not necessarily essential. As Savage points out, in historical inquiries it is often very difficult to establish common mentalities.⁴⁸ Moreover, some of the problems that have arisen with the documentation of deference are equally likely to recur in the search for shared senses of powerlessness – do a sufficiently significant proportion of the population share that sense, are those attitudes held consistently, and are they the bases of practical action? Within limits of historical evidence Gaventa probably did demonstrate the plausibility of his thesis of the sense of powerlessness: he used some innovative empirical tests of key propositions, establishing counter-factuals as required in Lukes’s methodology by comparative analysis, identifying non-issues, showing that grievances existed, etc.

Inspired by Gaventa’s method Cornish, studying British ironstone miners in East Cleveland, demonstrated persuasively that, despite genuine grievances (wage cuts were a regular feature of their work experience), mobilisation was precluded by a mixture of factors.⁴⁹ Amongst these, the fluctuations in product demand, an oligarchic and ineffective trade union adapting to its powerlessness, and petit-bourgeois dominance of community institutions were particularly significant.

One thing that both these cases have in common is that employers had considerable influence over non-work aspects of the miners lives. As Cornish put it:

It is of some significance that house rent, fuel and explosives could all be deducted from wages by the mining companies. This indicates in a small way how the mine-owners controlled not only the conditions of work but also much outside of work that was essential to the miner. The phenomenon of the company town did not occur in East Cleveland, due in part to the decreasing willingness of the owners to invest extensively in ventures outside the increasingly financially precarious mining operations and also to difficulties in purchasing land from local landowners in some areas. Most of the communities did, however, have a proportion of the housing stock provided and controlled by the company (usually for key workers) and the more paternalistically inclined owners provided for miners’ institutes, chapels and churches.⁵⁰

The concept of unitary power is a limiting case of types of local power structure, demonstrating, *inter alia*, the potential impact of employers’

⁴⁸ Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ S. Cornish, “Powerlessness in Peripheral Regions: the Case of the Non-Militant Miner”, in G. Rees *et al.* (eds), *Political Action and Social Identity: Class, Locality and Ideology* (London, 1985), pp. 43–64.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

interventions in the sphere of the reproduction of labour power in any understanding of local power relations. It suggests the existence of other cases approximating to unitary power and, conversely, that in some places power will be relatively fragmented. One resolution to the inconclusive community power debate would be systematically to recognise local variation in terms of mechanisms that generate power and powerlessness.

4. *Conditions of dependence in Lancaster*

Gaventa's study indicates a whole series of conditions and mechanisms which, combined together, reinforce the workers' powerlessness. In the case of Lancaster, the quiescence of labour can be most parsimoniously explained in terms of a degree of dependence induced by the *conjunction* of local labour-market conditions, the prevalent types of control at work and the modes of service provision for the reproduction of labour power.⁵¹ These interdependent mechanisms, though changing during the period, operated in such ways as to keep labour persistently and abjectly dependent until the 1960s. There is sufficient evidence of employer collaboration to warrant the deduction that capital, in the pursuit of profit, may have wide, if partially unintended, effects on local political processes.⁵²

These material conditions do not exhibit identical rhythms to the phases of political development. The key, general features of the system of economic power in the town persisted from around 1905 right through to the 1960s. Of course changes did occur, but they did not significantly tilt the balance of power towards labour. The political hegemony secured by Ashton's victory in 1911 was maintained, though in changing forms, on the strength of material dependence.

Lancaster has always been a relatively isolated and self-contained labour market. With the exception of the nearby urban district of Morecambe and Heysham, Lancaster is situated in the middle of a large rural hinterland, twenty miles from the nearest sizeable towns – Preston to the south and Kendal to the north. In the first half of the 20th century, Lancaster provided the bulk of opportunities for factory employment in the area and the vast majority of the town's workers were local residents. In this way employers had a captive labour force: migration was the only serious option to the factories for most working-class people.

⁵¹ For a theoretical elaboration of these concepts and their interrelationships, see A. Warde, "Industrial Restructuring, Local Politics and the Reproduction of Labour Power: Some Theoretical Issues", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 6 (1988), pp. 75–95.

⁵² See also A. Warde, "Industrial Discipline: Factory Regime and Politics in Lancaster", *Work, Employment and Society*, 3 (1989), pp. 49–64.

On its own this would be unimportant if there was open competition between many employers for labour in the area. However, Lancaster was also a dominated labour market, i.e. from the first decade of the century to the thirties a single industry (oilcloth manufacture) comprising two establishments (Williamsons and Storeys) employed a very substantial proportion of the local workforce. Probably about 35% of the employed population in 1921 worked for one of these two firms. Williamsons and Storeys exploited their dominance in the labour market to the full through a variety of collaborative means. They recognised the same unions – craft unions only. They agreed wage levels – a practice which continued through into the 1970s. And they operated exclusive internal labour markets, which was probably the most effective mechanism of all deployed to control workers, as I shall now show.

4.1. *General unions*

There were elements of a “divide and rule” strategy in the major employers’ attitudes to trade unions. The unions of skilled workers were acceptable. Both Williamsons and Storeys recognised engineering, engraving and weaving unions, paying the regional wage rates for such trades. But apart from a brief period between 1919 and 1922, when there was a branch of the NUGW at Williamsons’ Lune Mills, unskilled workers remained non-unionised until the 1960s,⁵³ though not for want of attempts to recruit on behalf of the general unions.

Williamsons and Storeys simply refused to countenance general unions. Williamson seemed to need to do little more than announce that he would not employ union members. In the context of his despotic relationship to his workers, this was probably sufficient. He was reputed to use a telescope at his home to watch workers arriving at work in the mornings. He kept a “black book” recording miscreant behaviour among his workers. And, of course, he had dismissed workers for being political supporters of Patrick Wall and the ILP.

The situation in the linoleum factories seems to have been replicated in the new firms which located in Lancaster. The brief and unsuccessful strike to obtain recognition for the National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers at Nelsons Silk Ltd. in 1939 was handled in a most authoritarian manner, as was indicated in section 2.3 above.

⁵³ Todd, *A History of Labour in Lancaster*, pp. 165–166.

4.2. *Wages*

The solidarity of the employers in Lancaster was one of the principal features of the town. Throughout the century there is evidence of collaboration over wage levels. Williamsons and Storeys had semi-official agreements about pay. As regards craftsmen, the regional offices of the unions would inform Williamsons of changes in agreed rates. Williamsons would usually, though not always, advance or cut the rates for their employees accordingly. They would then send Storeys notification of their decision and the latter would do likewise.⁵⁴ Surviving correspondence between the firms suggests that this was the case at least until the Second World War. After the war, management in the major manufacturing firms met on a regular basis to co-ordinate wage rates for non-skilled labour. There was, then, no wage competition between employers for the bulk of their manual labour, but rather a united front. This was probably facilitated by the fact that the labour market was both self-contained and dominated by a few large firms.

4.3. *Internal labour markets*

Probably, though, the most effective mechanism of all maintaining the dependence of workers was the operation of internal labour markets at Williamsons and Storeys. Internal labour markets are not very well understood. So far as their effects on industrial politics are concerned, the worker responses produced can easily be confused with the deference frequently attributed to workers in paternalist enterprises. In Lancaster, especially, where there were relatively few alternative opportunities for unskilled workers, the internal labour markets of the two main employers rendered the workforce heavily dependent. Investigation into the organisation of Storeys shows that it was very rare for a worker aged eighteen or over to be taken on by the firm. Only 13% of the workers taken on between 1925 and 1937 were over eighteen, and the majority of those had actually been employed previously by the firm. Thus, there was effectively a single port of entry for labourers, the resulting job-for-life meant that industrial discipline was a potentially extremely costly individual risk, because obtaining a job elsewhere in the area would be extremely difficult. Various devices were used to maintain the exclusivity of the internal labour market, including collaboration between the two employers. One entry in a register of leavers from Storeys gave the reason for the dismissal of a certain Vincent Landor as: "Discharged. We found he had worked for J(ames) W(illiamson) and S(on) and had not left properly (they complained)."⁵⁵ In many

⁵⁴ See Warde, "Industrial Discipline: Factory Regime and Politics in Lancaster", p. 57.

respects the mechanism of the internal labour market was a more powerful reason for industrial quiescence than the more transparent and shocking aspects of Ashton's practices of surveillance and coercion. The cost of industrial or political resistance was frequently too great.

The strength of the main employers was, then, considerable. Williamson and Storeys in particular ensured that there would be no unskilled unions, low wages and no mobility between firms. What is more surprising was the situation after the arrival of new firms in the late twenties. Lancaster experienced a period of industrial restructuring in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Firms associated with textile manufacture and processing, and especially manufacturers of artificial fibres, came to Lancaster, the most important of them being Standfast Dyers, the Cellulose Acetate Silk Co. Ltd. (later called Lansil) and Nelsons Silk Ltd. In consequence, the labour market was tight even at the height of the Slump: only 6.5% men were recorded unemployed in the 1931 Census.

Perhaps more significant than the expansion of employment opportunities were the changes in factory regime. The town was in the forefront of the move to scientific management in Britain. Four Lancaster firms engaged Bedaux to advise on systems of work control in the early 1930s (Storeys, the Cellulose Acetate Silk Co. Ltd., Standfast Dyers and Morton Sundour Fabrics). Given that Littler estimates that only about 200–250 firms in Britain were clients,⁵⁶ to find four in a town the size of Lancaster is remarkable. That resistance to the introduction of work control amounted to no more than one half-day strike at Standfast Dyers is again indicative of the character of labour in Lancaster.

One other instructive aspect of the restructuring of the late twenties was the elimination of women workers from the linoleum industry. It is not a matter referred to in documentary sources, but the gender composition of the workforce in linoleum and oilcloth manufacture in northwest England altered radically between 1921–1931 according to the Census.⁵⁷ It would seem that women were dismissed without protest, perhaps because they were able to find work in the new artificial fibres industry in the town: there was no significant change in women's economic activity rates even though about 1400 women's jobs disappeared from linoleum manufacture.⁵⁸ This loss of jobs indicates both that women workers were no more likely to resist employer power than their male counterparts and that the major Lancaster

⁵⁵ Storeys Leavers' Book, 1897–1907.

⁵⁶ C. R. Littler, "The Bureaucratisation of the Shop-Floor: the Development of Modern Work Systems", 2 vols (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, London School of Economics, 1980).

⁵⁷ See A. Warde, "Changes in the Occupational Structure of Lancaster 1901–1951", *Lancaster Regionalism Group Working Paper No.4* (University of Lancaster, 1982), pp. 43–51.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

employers had alighted on *patriarchal* managerial strategies. Employer patriarchalism may have been acceptable to male workers, but the limited levels of unionisation make it unlikely that the main impetus for the expulsion of women came from organised labour in this instance. Such an effective employer strategy may have encouraged women to mobilise through the alternative channels of urban politics accounting, in part, for the strengthening of Labour Party support at the end of the inter-war period.

In terms of industrial relations the restructuring of the thirties had no perceptible effect. Lancaster remained as calm as ever. The principal reason was that employer collaboration and internal labour markets continued to operate. That, mixed with the industrial powerlessness, was sufficient to maintain employer domination in the factories. Restructuring did, however, have some effect on political mobilisation, but almost exclusively as a result of changes in behaviour in the sphere of reproduction of labour power. As we saw above, the Labour Party became more active in the late 1930s and began to mobilise some support. As in many places where unions were not very strong, it was issues of consumption (i.e. the provision of public welfare services) which became central in Labour Party politics.⁵⁹ Labour's involvement in housing issues in the thirties was critical in Lancaster. But that was in a context of a general shift in the ways in which services were being provided. The older civic benevolence had become of much reduced importance. But during the inter-war years the local authority did not significantly compensate. Voluntary provision was thus of major importance at this time. Also, a couple of companies began to make provision for their own employees. The shortfall gave Labour the opportunity to mobilise support by pressing for better state provision of welfare services. It was through this channel that Labour began to make some progress between 1935 and 1965. Thus a base for a Labour presence in electoral politics was engineered and that generated a challenge to the political hegemony of the employers. However, it did little to reduce the dependence of the Lancaster working class in a town where job opportunities and labour resistance were so effectively controlled by the major employing organisations.

The 1960s in Lancaster saw the beginnings of deindustrialisation, as the major manufacturing firms, following changes in ownership, began to rationalise their operations. Beginning from 1964, multinational corporations bought out all the large local manufacturing companies. With declining local control of the firms went a decline of interest in local political affairs. For instance, in 1957 the presidency of the Lancaster and District

⁵⁹ See J. Mark-Lawson, "Women, Welfare and Urban Politics: a Comparative Analysis of Luton and Nelson 1917-34" (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Lancaster University, 1988); Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics*, pp. 171-179.

Chamber of Commerce was vacated by a director of Storeys, to be replaced by a director of Williamsons. The likelihood of managing directors of the externally-owned local firms being centrally involved in such organisations in the 1970s was slight. The subsequent process of rationalisation, which involved the first redundancies in 1967, also affected the relationships between workers and employers. Not only were fewer workers employed, but security of long-term employment with the same firm was put in doubt. The system of internal labour markets was undermined.

The inter-firm exclusiveness of employment also began to dissolve in the 1960s. Unskilled workers began to move between the manufacturing firms in conditions of full employment, seeking a change and pursuing better bonus payments and opportunities for overtime.⁶⁰ So while basic wage rates were still regulated and uniform, other conditions of employment varied. The arrival of new public sector enterprises also expanded opportunities for occupational mobility and those institutions – education and health especially – could never be party to local wage or recruitment agreements. The control that employers exercised over workers was reduced. This was partly reflected in, and probably partly caused by, the spread of trade unionism among non-skilled workers. The Transport and General Workers Union began to organise labourers from the early 1960s, and were in successful dispute over the enforcement of a closed shop at Storeys in 1968 and Lansils in 1969. A closed shop also came into operation at Williamsons in the 1970s.

The collapse of the system of internal labour markets, unionisation, the shift to external control and the growth of public-sector-service employment transformed the local labour market. First, there was an increasing tendency for workers to be recruited from outside Lancaster. Medical staff, teachers, managers in multi-national corporations, nuclear engineers and construction workers obtained their positions through regional or national labour markets. There were thus more in-migrants and the manufacturing firms could not so easily control local labour market conditions. Management of the private sector manufacturing organisations constantly complained about competition for labour from public institutions, especially of the Heysham power station's capacity to attract skilled labour away by paying higher wages.⁶¹ With rationalisation, which by the 1980s had reduced manufacturing employment in the area to very low levels, operating units became smaller too. No longer were a handful of personnel managers responsible for recruitment to a substantial proportion of the jobs available locally. This, along with the de-centralised recruitment practices of the health and education services, produced a more *fragmented* local labour market. What had once been a pillar of a highly concentrated system of

⁶⁰ Employer interview.

⁶¹ Employer interviews.

local power had become of negligible political significance. The conditions of dependence were much alleviated.

In itself, the loosening of the control of capital had no direct political effect, for mobilisation is a prerequisite of change in the field of political domination. Indeed, it was very diverse forms of political action that transformed power relations and political practice in the town: various social movements, tenants' groups, territorial alliances were as much involved as trade unions and the Labour Party. Those events are chronicled in detail elsewhere.⁶² For present purposes, the point is that the conditions of dependence, which had frozen the contours of Lancaster politics from 1911 until the sixties, had melted down.

5. Conclusion

The historical argument, then, is that the quiescence of labour in Lancaster was a result of specific conditions of dependence that inhibited resistance. Factory work, the nature of the local labour market and the local system of welfare service provision combined to render the town's workers powerless. Powerlessness suffused both industrial and party politics. There is evidence neither of deference nor popular Toryism, merely inaction. Economic dependence raises the stakes in public expression of discontent. As Offe and Wiesenthal observe, effective political resistance for subordinate groups depends upon collective mobilisation that is necessarily public.⁶³ In Lancaster the threshold of political dissent was established in 1911 and it was not much altered until the economic conditions of dependence were transformed by industrial restructuring in the 1960s.

Theoretically, the significance of this is a reinterpretation of a local history whose distinctive features have usually been attributed to paternalism and deference. The development of class politics in Lancaster seems to be a weaker form of the local system described by Gaventa, a case not of unitary, but of concentrated, oligarchic power. Employers could draw on their economic power and on a political hegemony which maintained the quiescence of the powerless. But that power was not totally pervasive. Lancaster was not a company town. Housing was never company controlled. Nor were other aspects of service provision directly in the hands of employers. Workers had realms of autonomy; they were less tightly constrained than Appalachian miners, but they were constrained nonetheless.

⁶² See Mark-Lawson and Warde, "Industrial Restructuring and the Transformation of a Local Political Environment", pp. 11–30.

⁶³ C. Offe and H. Wiesenthal, "Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organisational Form", *Political Power and Social Theory*, 1 (1980), pp. 67–115.

It was only with the onset of deindustrialisation that obstacles to mobilisation were removed.

These reflections on conditions of dependence indicate the extent to which *locality* is implicated in the reproduction of those conditions of dependence. In Lancaster, it was important both that the major firms at the beginning of the century were local and that they were externally owned at the point where the local system of employer dominance dissolved. (This in itself is ironic, insofar as it is so regularly presumed that local ownership confers benefits on residents and that external ownership is a much inferior situation.) It was also important that Lancaster was an isolated and self-contained labour market: except where workers were willing to migrate (which they appear to have been loathe to do, in general), their employment prospects were dependent on the firms established in the town. The spatial element of isolation made it more obvious and easier for the employers to get together to regulate the labour market. Refusing to take workers previously employed by another firm and making agreements on wage-levels for process workers were two further mechanisms for control strongly facilitated by, and probably impossible in the absence of, clear geographical boundaries. The way in which these structural conditions were worked up into a sustainable political hegemony also drew on the symbolism of a spatial identity generated in civic affairs.