The electoral defeat of 1979 sparked a major debate inside and outside the British Labour party about the state of the party and its relationship to its historic base of support in the British working class. With Thatcher's re-election in June of 1983, the debate was intensified and infused with a new sense of urgency. It is now generally agreed that Labour is in deep crisis, that it can no longer count upon the routine support even of the industrial workers, and that, if the party is ever again to pose as the main alternative to Conservatism, it must begin a process of rebuilding its electoral
support among both manual and non-manual workers.¹

The experience of massive defeat has shocked both supporters and critics of the party. As Raymond Williams has argued, “Who among us could have believed in 1945 or 1966, or even in 1974, that at the beginning of the 1980s we should have not only a powerful right-wing government, trying with some success to go back to the politics and the economics of the 1930s, but—even worse—a social order that has literally decimated the British working class, imposing the cruelty of several million unemployed?”² The shock has prompted a major reappraisal of Labour party politics and the beginnings, at least, of a reinterpretation of its history. This debate over Labour is of considerable significance, for it has implications both for the practical prospects for socialist transformation in advanced capitalist societies, and for the theoretical utility of a class analysis of politics. This paper represents a sympathetic, but nevertheless critical commentary on this discussion, particularly on the reading of history utilized in the debate.

Let us begin the critique at a most general level, i.e., with the form the debate ordinarily took and its underlying assumptions. The most pervasive image that emerges from all the discussion about the fate of Labour is that of a steady decline from some past state when working class membership translated almost automatically into support for the Labour party. Since the language of the debate is more often sociological than historical, the precise moment when such a state existed is seldom specified. Rather there is the assumption that, whenever it was that class and politics happily went together, it was the natural and normal thing, and that what is abnormal, unnatural and thus in need of explanation is the fact that it no longer exists. When the argument is made in historical terms, as it occasionally is, it is clear that the moment which comes closest to being the ideal past state was the immediate post-war period, the era of the Labour governments of 1945-51.

Whether the discussion takes a sociological or an historical form however, the assumption that class should translate relatively unproblematically into political behavior remains the same. In the sociological variant, it is assumed that working class membership means participation in a distinct set of institutions, and sharing a particular set of attitudes, which together bring in their train a more or less spontaneous identifi-
cation with Labour as the party of the working class. In the historical variant, it is likewise assumed, as Eric Hobsbawm has put it, that "the political expression of class consciousness... means in practice... support for the Labour party." Given this assumption, it becomes a relatively simple matter to read the rise of the Labour party as a logical by-product of the very formation of the working class. In this view, workers came to be gathered together in urban industrial contexts over the course of industrialization, and gradually created their own communities, social institutions and patterns of daily life in their new environment. These in turn were projected into the political arena when the class became sufficiently large and "mature", and according to some, when the autonomy of its institutions came to be threatened. That Labour should be the vehicle for that entry into politics is seldom troubled over, and ordinarily is viewed as natural. The process, thus conceived, peaked in 1945-51, and persisted with little change for some years after, providing the social underpinnings for the stable, class-based politics of the 1950s and 1960s.

Whatever the mode of analysis, the premise appears to be that the normal state of things in Britain—some would say in all advanced industrial societies—is for class allegiances and structures to coincide roughly with political alignments. Most of the analyses offered in the debate about the state of Labour and the working class therefore assume that Labour's recent decline is essentially abnormal and requires explanation in these terms—that is, as a deviation from what one should expect. This starting point goes a long way towards determining as well the specific substantive reasons offered for Labour's deepening crisis. Since class and politics are assumed to be so closely related, most analysts quickly leap from the decline of Labour party politics to notions about the decline in the working class itself, or more precisely, about the transformation of the class into something very different from what it once was. A brief look at the arguments of a selection of authors describing the current crisis will make this point clear enough. To show the similarity of outlook, regardless of approach, let us take an English historian, Eric Hobsbawm, an American political scientist, Samuel Beer, and an Anglo-German sociologist, Ralf Dahrendorf.

Eric Hobsbawm, the most eminent historian of the British working class, has written perhaps the most interesting attempt
to put the present situation into a longer term perspective. He was moved, in his Marx Memorial Lecture for 1978, to ask why "the forward march of the Labour movement... appears to have come to a halt in this country about twenty-five or thirty years ago." The disarray within the movement, as he describes it, has been manifest first and foremost in a weakening of "support for the Labour party"; and certainly the election results of 1979 and 1983 have confirmed that trend. But the crisis has been visible also, Hobsbawm claims, in the changed tone and demeanor of other aspects of the movement. The conduct of strikes for example, has altered so it now appears that "the strength of a group lies not in the amount of loss they can cause to the employer, but in the inconvenience they can cause to the public, i.e., to other workers...." The very demands of strikes seem also to be somewhat lacking in nobility. Inflation and full employment have eroded the old sense of "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work", and have taught workers the amoral values of the market. Wage demands have escalated, and the combination of seemingly limitless claims and sectional styles of protest has strained the ties of class loyalty among workers, while alienating the broader, middle class public.

For Beer and Dahrendorf, the crisis of the working class is the key to the much broader crisis within contemporary Britain. To Dahrendorf, the distinguishing feature of British society and politics over the years has been solidarity. "Britain", he says, "is not a society of individual competition, it is a society of solidarity." Underpinning this civic solidarity has been the cohesiveness of social class, particularly among working people. "The working class", he argues, "epitomises what such solidarity means." Present difficulties can thus best be understood as a coming apart of the component parts of the society, a loosening of that "glue which binds social groups together". The process has affected all layers of British society, but as Dahrendorf sees it, "changes in the size, position, character and behaviour of the working classes symbolize all the other changes that have happened." The "bonds of class... are weakening", and workers have begun to act as individuals, or more often, as sectional groupings organized in trade unions or even smaller units, pursuing their narrow interests with little regard either for the common welfare or the interests of the class.4

Samuel Beer takes the diagnosis a step further, and uses it
to describe the essentially political malaise of Britain; he calls it “pluralist stagnation” and attributes it largely to the process of class decomposition. Where class loyalties once provided the basis of stable politics, now the fading of class loyalties has produced the “paralysis of public choice” that has marked recent British history and doomed the efforts at economic management of Labour and the Conservatives alike. The earlier success of collectivist politics in Britain—the putting into place of the welfare state, the restructuring of the economy along more socially responsible lines, and the articulation of class interests into stable partisan alignments—unwittingly resulted, in Beer’s view, in the convergence of classes and of party programmes. This in turn caused a narrowing of political choice, and the rise in its place of a “new group politics” centered on the competition for public benificence. The “pay scramble” of the unions came first, but the “subsidy scramble” of the employers soon rivalled it in intensity, and in its deleterious effects upon both the economy and the ability of either party to govern. What touched off the former, in Beer’s view, was the more long-term process of “class decomposition”, set in motion by the rising prosperity of the welfare state, and culminating in the transformation of the solidaristic working class of the 1940s and 1950s into the competing syndicalist groups that now represent the bulk of the country’s workforce. While “[s]ectationalism has always plagued the labor movement”, Beer explains, “from one generation to another the broad direction toward or away from solidarity has shifted profoundly”; in the most recent phase, “Class composition was succeeded by class decomposition into local and occupational fragments.”

It might be useful to add here that the sense of decay, of disintegration, has found echoes among many workers as well. One working class woman, from among the many interviewed recently by Jeremy Seabrook, expressed poignantly the “dislocation in working-class tradition” when she explained: “What we’ve got now, it’s nothing to do with socialism. It’s a mocking of all the things we fought for... I don’t know what’s happened to folk. They’ve all got greedy-grabbing, that’s the trouble.” A worker from Nottingham put it more concisely: “When we had nowt, we threatened the rich. Now we act like they did.” And another expressed bitter disappointment at the futility of chasing after wages when he commented, “You can’t
ruin the capitalist system simply by taking money off it, and that's what the working class is doing. You can't beat them economically. There's got to be an awakening of the working class, a spiritual awakening. I don't know whether it will come.” A somewhat younger worker from the East Midlands conveyed a near-total disillusion: “In my lifetime I've seen working-class people become more cynical. People actually get through their lives without believing in anything. Now when I was young, the labour movement had a meaning; it had a moral content. It could challenge the morality of capitalism, and appeal to something in us that was generous and magnanimous... What the working class had to oppose capitalism is running pretty thin now.”

Probably the most obvious feature of all these descriptions—and we could produce many more examples—is the quick and easy slippage in each formulation between the discussion of the crisis of Labour as a party and discussions of some broader crisis affecting the working class itself. Even before the authors begin seriously to develop their specific arguments about the causes of the present problem, they telegraph the nature of their ultimate explanation by mixing up the party and the class in the very description of the problem. The recourse to social structural explanation is made, therefore, even before the political dimensions of the problem are recognized and discussed, and certainly prior to the development and testing of any argument that assumes the political crisis might in fact be rooted in factors themselves primarily political in nature.

Let us again return to Hobsbawm to see the way this preference for structural explanation affects the details of the analysis. To Hobsbawm, the first fact underlying the political trend is the simple failure of the manual workers to continue their numerical growth, and the consequent rise within the workforce of white collar and service sector employees. Even among manual workers, as he explains, there have been shifts away from the old centres of trade union strength and working class culture, like textiles, mining and shipbuilding, and a tendency for adult male workers in old and new industries to be replaced by women who, Hobsbawm fears, may be less committed to the “common style of proletarian life”, or to the values of trade unionism.
Hobsbawm proceeds to argue further that the dispersal of old working class neighbourhoods and their replacement by blocks of flats or council estates somehow has lessened solidarity as well. Years ago, he points out, the working class was “a collection of localized communities locally rooted to a much greater extent than the middle classes.” But this comfortable, older pattern has been replaced by a new, more planned, but more sterile social ecology that has produced, in Seabrook’s words, “the desolation of ruined communities and broken associations”, which now characterizes urban Britain. The destruction of community, so the argument runs, has reinforced the transformation of the economy so as to marginalize, isolate and “privatize” the working class.

While these factors have been undermining the solidity of the workers as a class, rising living standards have removed the edge from their material grievances. Thus to the extent that workers still pursue wage gains, as the record of strikes indicates they do, this very expression of militancy is taken as evidence not of “class consciousness”, or even of resentment at inequality, but as a symptom of the growing acceptance by working people of the culture of consumption. From this perspective, the rise of unofficial strikes and shop stewards’ organization indicates a reversion to sectionalism, rather than a challenge to authority. Hence, too, the wage militancy they stimulate becomes the symbol of the absence of proletarian values, and so loses its former meaning as a battle between classes.

The factors cited by Hobsbawm have been debated and elaborated upon in considerable detail by other participants in the discussion of Labour’s impasse. But whatever the specific contributions or dissents of different contributors, they tend to share a common interpretive logic. To that extent, their discussions remain embedded in an overall style of analysis that is remarkable for its unproblematical conception of the links between politics and class structure.

All of it would seem therefore, to be equally vulnerable to an objection that, if simple, is nonetheless telling. This is that there is no justification for assuming that there is, or ever was, a close and necessary correspondence between class structure and the patterning of political allegiances. What makes this objection especially forceful and effective is that it is, or can be, grounded both empirically and theoretically, and with arguments developed by both Marxists and non-Marxists.
Empirically, two decades of quite sophisticated research in the history of labour and of social movements generally—a good deal of it, incidentally, done by Hobsbawm himself, or by scholars deeply influenced by his work—have produced a virtual consensus on the impossibility of deducing political consciousness and behavior from social location. Social location undoubtedly creates certain “realities” around which consciousness must be structured, and it puts constraints upon the range of political options open to ordinary people; but it produces neither consciousness nor action in any direct sense.

Such empirical findings have been paralleled by developments in class theory. Neo-Weberians, like Parkin and Giddens, have written convincingly about the manifold social processes that intervene between the inchoate formation of common interest in the market, and the emergence of class awareness or consciousness at the level of politics. Giddens has labelled this complicated set of processes class “structuration”, while Parkin has referred to these processes more voluntaristically as “strategies of social closure”. But whichever tag is chosen, the focus is unambiguously upon what mediates between class position and the organization and awareness of class.⁷

Developments within the Marxist perspective have been a bit more varied, but they have tended in the same direction. A great deal of work has been done on the translation of upper class social and economic dominance into political power; and here, too, the stress has been upon the complications attending that process. Yet another substantial body of research has set itself the task of defining the class position of white collar workers and other intermediate strata; and again, the definitions tend to turn upon what used to be considered distinctly secondary aspects of social structure—like what kind of firm one works in, or how much discretion one has in going about the job, or, probably most important, whether one is male or female.⁸ But probably the clearest parallels between Marxist writing on class and the work of the social historians and the neo-Weberians have appeared in the work of those interested in working class political behavior. Here the aim has been to discover what contingent historical factors, outside of the purely economic, condition the process of “class formation”. The basis of such efforts has been an assumption made explicit
by Adam Przeworski in his review of Marxist theories of class formation. “Concrete analysis”, he argues, “is incompatible with the view of classes as spontaneously emerging subjects that simply march on to transform history.” The very emergence of groups as historical actors, as political supporters of one or another party, thus cannot be inferred from the identification of sociological categories, but must be explained. Beginning with this assumption, scholars working on this problem have normally settled upon the structures of the state, and of political participation, as the things that determine whether or not class identities generated incipiently in the workplace or the community will be “globalized” into broader visions of the social order, and projected into politics. This particular solution may of course turn out to be incomplete, but it is surely a great advance over the simplistic notions which it is seeking to replace.9

There has been, therefore, a convergence between several powerful traditions of research and theorizing, which runs directly counter to the sort of reasoning employed by most of those engaged in the contemporary debate about Labour. Grounds for criticisms are hence not terribly difficult to find. In a sense however, this critique is almost too neat, too easy and too effective. It is true, of course, that merely to pose the issue theoretically makes it obvious that the extant formulations are filled with gaps and elisions of a serious sort. But there is also a certain arrogance in asserting that scholars like Hobsbawm and Beer and Dahrendorf, and indeed many more of the most sophisticated in the present generation of British social scientists, do not grasp the fundamental indeterminacy of social structure, or the complexities of class formation. Hobsbawm, after all, should be as conversant with developments in class theory as any of us, and it is unlikely that the other participants in the debate about the current crisis of Labour are totally unaware of the problems of class formation.

There is also the uncomfortable fact that the arguments of today, even if in some sense mistaken, bear a remarkable resemblance to earlier arguments in the 1950s and 1960s about the problems then confronting Labour. The notion, for example, that behind the electoral difficulties of Labour lies the disintegration of the traditional working class surfaced as early as 1952 in *New Fabian Essays*, just months after the Tory victory of 1951, when, we should remember, Labour received more
popular votes than the Tories, and as high a percentage of working class votes as ever before or since. Such ideas, which picked up the label “revisionist” in the 1950s, continued to gain currency throughout that decade of electoral frustration, and became virtually dominant in the party and in informed political discourse after the Conservative election victory of 1959.\textsuperscript{10} By 1959-60, the idea had taken on a much sharper form, and was generally discussed as the “embourgeoisement” or “affluent worker” hypothesis. This version of the argument did not fare particularly well in the later 1960s, as social scientists came to point out its inadequacies and to replace it with more limited, if essentially similar, notions regarding “privatization” and the rise of “instrumentalist” and pecuniary orientations among working people. The notion also suffered from its apparent inability to make sense of the resurgence of industrial conflict in the 1960s as well as the temporary electoral success of Labour under Harold Wilson’s leadership.\textsuperscript{11}

The recent troubles of the Labour party and the increasing disillusion, both on the left and on the right, with the efficacy of industrial action, have led to a new wave of theorizing that avoids the terms used in the older analyses, but nonetheless shares their premises and echoes their specific, substantive arguments. The sectionalism lamented by Hobsbawm, for example, is not far removed from the type of behavior that Goldthorpe \textit{et al.} felt would follow from “instrumental collectivism”, and certainly the emphasis on home ownership and individual consumption in the current discussion is much the same as that in the original “affluent worker” literature—so too, and perhaps most noticeably, is the insistence on the role of the decline of community, especially the older forms of working class community, in weakening the ties and the sense of solidarity that used to pervade working class culture.

This similarity, this continuity in the analysis of Labour and the working class, may be variously interpreted. One can with some justice take it as evidence of a theoretical weakness within British social science and a consequent inability of scholars (and political commentators) to break out of established modes of thought and analysis. But one can also take it as at least indirect evidence of the persistence of class-based politics and class structures generally in Britain. Put more positively, the fact that so many scholars and political activists assume that class
and politics should go together suggests that, for some considerable period of time, such a linkage did actually obtain in Britain; the coming apart of that linkage, which had taken on the appearance of a natural phenomenon, has been the truly new thing about the evolution of British political life since about 1950.\textsuperscript{12}

If that is true, and I believe it is, then it would seem more appropriate to attempt a recasting of the current argument than to dismiss it as theoretically naive. Essential to this task of course is the replacement of assumptions about the inevitable reflection of class structures and interests in politics with questions about the contexts and contingencies that at one point allowed such a reflection in Britain, and then prevented it. These are essentially historical, and involve asking, first, what circumstances about British class structure and political life brought about the increasing alignment of the working class behind the Labour party in the first half of the twentieth century; and, second, what further developments in the interaction of class structure and politics brought about the progressive de-alignment of the working class from the Labour party since the early 1950s?

These questions do not permit definitive answers at present, primarily because research has often revolved around a quite different set of questions. Nonetheless, the extant literature on labour and society in Britain suggests that several factors were critical in producing the growing articulation of class and political allegiance in the first half of the twentieth century and their progressive dissociation since that time. Let us briefly summarize these, and try to suggest how they have interacted to produce Labour's current difficulties.\textsuperscript{13}

Among the factors underlying Labour's "rise to power", probably the most striking from any comparative perspective was the party's relationship to the dense network of institutions running through the neighbourhoods and the workplaces of the urban workers. The British working class has been probably the best organized in the western world; in no other country, it appears, was there ever such a vast array of formal and informal institutions engulfing the working class, as in Great Britain. It is true, of course, that workers in other countries created networks of sociability, distinctive forms of leisure and a variety of self-help organizations. But nowhere
was the network wider, and nowhere was it so deeply rooted in the class. The formal institutions rooted in the working class included friendly societies, burial clubs, building societies and other means of mobilizing workers' meager financial resources for pressing needs. A large number of groups, often centered upon pubs, or occasionally the churches and chapels, organized to pursue some sort of social or cultural activity or some hobby; plus, of course, the pub itself and its rival, the working-men's club. These institutions did little for working class women of course, whose lives were much more circumscribed by the routines of child care and housekeeping, or in cases where women held paying jobs outside the home, as in the textile areas of Lancashire, by the dual burdens involved. Still, women often did manage to forge strong networks of friends and neighbours, and some even succeeded in turning these informal associations into formal organizations. Perhaps the most interesting and important of these was the Women's Cooperative Guild, which was designed to serve women's needs as consumers, but also served as a vehicle through which a significant number of women became politically active. Research into this complicated world of working class social organization is as yet very new and underdeveloped, but it has nonetheless made sufficient progress to allow us to conclude with some confidence that the kind of rich social life conjured up in such books as *The Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart, or *The Classic Slum* by Robert Roberts, and documented from the perspective of family life by the Institute of Community Studies during the 1950s, did indeed characterize the older working class areas of Britain.

The organization of working people in the community was of course more than paralleled at the workplace. Skilled workers managed to stabilize their organizations by the middle of the last century, and they grew steadily after that. Beginning in about 1870, moreover, the less skilled workers in industry took increasingly to unions, and although progress among these groups was more erratic, it was nonetheless real. There were large waves of strikes, and of attempts to enroll the unorganized, in 1889-90, in 1911-13, and just after the First World War. By about 1920, the mass of industrial workers were in unions, along with most workers in transport and construction. Organization inevitably suffered during the inter-war years,
but overall it is the strength rather than the weakness of the unions that is most evident over the course of the twentieth century.

This extreme propensity for organization, in industry and community, formal and informal, itself requires some explanation; for if workers everywhere tend, in the process of class formation, to evolve institutions of their own, some special aspect of the process in Britain must have encouraged such an overgrowth of organizations. Clearly one factor was the pace of class formation: the British working class was formed over a very protracted period. It was drawn, moreover, from a rural proletariat long separated from the ownership of land and with its own well-established customs and traditions. Indeed, if there is a single overriding conclusion to be drawn from E.P. Thompson's work, I would take it to be an affirmation of the vitality of these customs and traditions before the onset of rapid industrialization, and their import in shaping the consciousness that ultimately emerged from that industrial experience.17

The slow pace of class formation at the level of society was replicated in detail in the modest character of change at the workplace. Industrial growth in Britain was accomplished largely through an expansion of skilled jobs, rather than through their degradation or elimination, and the labour-intensive quality of British industry served to produce a proliferation of intermediate grades of labour. These developments were highly conducive to organization. So, too, was the fact that British employers were never able to assert their control over the labour process in the fashion of employers elsewhere. Whether due to the aspirations for control among the workers, or to the lack of incentives on the part of management, there was never a decisive breakthrough to managerial control of the workplace itself. This, too, naturally aided organization, for it allowed the easy formation of informal networks among the workers, which could then be translated into formal organizations when prompted to do so by some unpopular management initiative, or by sustained organizing efforts.18

Organization was also aided by the state. Though hostile to unions in the first part of the nineteenth century, the British government liberalized the law on combinations in 1824-25, and never after that reverted to the outright prohibition char-
acteristic of other regimes. The state moved towards a further liberalization of the law on unions in the 1870s, and from 1890, became more or less positively predisposed to organization. Growing state involvement in social services before the First World War, and in economic affairs during the war, also strengthened government support for organizing; for the state preferred, where possible, to deal with organized groups in the provision of services, or in the regulation of industry. Thus during the war, the state promoted both greater organization among workers, and the formation of coordinating groups among businessmen and employers. If these tendencies were largely checked between the wars, they were still not reversed; and by that time, organization was solidly established on both sides of industry.¹⁹

If it was what one might call "liberal" or "progressive" practices of the state that stimulated, or at least permitted, organization at work, it was probably the depth of social conservatism that abetted organization in other spheres. It is not entirely clear whether the British class system was especially rigid by international standards. The data are simply not good enough to make such comparisons.²⁰ But class boundaries certainly appeared very firm to most Englishmen throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries; and it has been a commonplace of social commentary in Britain that instances of social mobility have ordinarily extracted a very heavy psychological price from those who have had the experience of traversing one or more such boundaries. This sense of the importance and persistence of social distinctions has been reinforced by the extremely class-bound nature of the educational system, and by the much broader permeation of the culture, including religious life, by class sentiments and antipathies. It was reflected, too, in extensive residential segregation, which in turn promoted the growth of a quite distinct sector of petty traders, catering primarily to working people.

More broadly, British workers were forced to provide all sorts of services for themselves. As we have seen, they built their own institutions, for example, to insure themselves against death or sickness; used their unions to provide support for those out of work; and fashioned their own institutions for advancing credit. On top of this, British workers did a large amount of their consuming through their own groups—
through savings clubs or through the widespread cooperative movement. To be sure, not all of working class life was so structured, but an impressive amount of it was—that is, it was lived through class-specific social institutions.\textsuperscript{21}

The first factor contributing to the political organization of the working class was thus the organization of the class for other purposes. For that organization to take political form as support for the Labour party required several further things. First, an important precondition for projecting locally-based class loyalties onto a national party of labour was the national power of the British state.

Well before industrialization, the national state was firmly in place in England, and by 1801 the English state had consolidated its rule in Scotland and Ireland. It took a bit longer for ordinary people to turn their attention toward the center, and for popular protest to take on a national character. The Wilkite agitations of the 1760s and 1770s, for example, were concentrated in London and the southeast and never became truly national, although inevitably their demands were aimed at the political center. The social movements of the 1830s and 1840s however, definitely were national in scope. The struggles for Catholic Emancipation and for reform, Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law League were in this sense quite decisive breakthroughs. This national orientation lessened somewhat after the 1840s, but re-appeared later in the century. With the professionalization of the Civil Service after 1870, the gradual adoption of a more interventionist role by the central government, and the de facto extension of the franchise to working class men at roughly the same time, this national orientation turned increasingly to demands for coordinated state actions, and to political strategies aimed at achieving national political clout.\textsuperscript{22}

These strategies did not at first lead to the creation of a specifically working class party. The Second Reform Bill was followed quickly by the mobilization of the great bulk of working class Liberalism a mere passing fancy, for the enfranchised workers became a stable part of Liberal support from 1868 to the First World War. Nonetheless, between 1893 (when the Independent Labour party was founded, and the demand for a party of the working class launched into political discourse) and the end of the Great War, working people and their insti-
tutions switched their allegiance from the Liberals and, in certain places, the Conservatives to the Labour party. This great transformation in British politics seems to have been due to three further, related factors.

First, there was a deepening and strengthening of almost all of those institutions and networks through which urban workers led their lives. The slowing down of economic growth and the consolidation of working class neighbourhoods seem to have contributed to this waxing of the working class social presence, but whatever the precise causes, the product was a more distinctive and autonomous working class way of life, and an intensification of class loyalties and sentiments.

Second, there was a massive augmentation of working class strength in industry. Between 1889 and 1920, as we have argued, the unions grew enormously, and seemed by the end of the Great War to pose a dire threat to the ability of employers to run industry. "The frontier of control", as Carter Goodrich called it, shifted decisively towards the workers. Inevitably, such a change was not accomplished painlessly. Rather it was achieved by several violent bouts of industrial conflict. These periods of struggle pitted Liberal employers against their workers in one industrial area after another, and drove a wedge between these two social supports of the Liberal party. It also brought striking workers into confrontation with the state and the Liberals who headed it, thus furthering weakening the link between the Liberals and organized workers, and simultaneously lending credence to claims about the need for a party of the working class to capture control of the government. In addition, the growing strength of workers at the workplace led employers both to organize on their own behalf, and to attempt to bring the state and the courts into their battles with the workers. These efforts were quite successful, and led to the famous Taff Vale decision making unions liable for damages caused to business profits during strikes, a decision which threatened the very existence of unions and their ability to strike. The need to reverse this decision was, in fact, the main stimulus to the early growth of the Labour Representation Committee, which became the Labour party.

The third factor was simply the working out of the first two in party political terms. The increase in working class strength in the localities and in industry made the question of who rep-
resented the workers politically extremely urgent. In the context, the issue was whether the Liberals could somehow transform themselves into a people's party that would incorporate the demands of labour into a broader popular alliance, or whether a more specifically class-based alternative would succeed. Political historians have spent a quite inordinate amount of time debating this issue, and attempting to prove that Liberalism did indeed have the potential to become a mass political party bringing together under its banner both the working class and other social groupings. As evidence of this potential, historians point in particular to the electoral and policy successes of the so-called “New Liberalism” of 1906–1914, to the apparent failure of the Labour party prior to 1914, and to the role of the war in breaking apart the Liberal party.

The argument has merit, but in the end it seems inadequate, for it fails to reckon with the role of organizations and institutions in working class politics. Working people did not enter the political system as isolated, individual voters; rather, their participation was mediated by and through those strong organizations that played such a crucial role in everyday life. Thus, the question confronting the Liberals was not whether they could attract individual working class voters, nor even whether they could fashion a program of reform that would appeal to large numbers of such voters. It was whether or not they could forge stable links to the institutions and the culture of the urban workers; and it was this that they failed to do. The Liberals failed because they were already tied in locally to the urban middle classes. This caused them to resist strongly the adoption of working class candidates for office and working class styles of politics and rhetoric. It also divided local Liberal employers from local workers. Nationally, the same process occurred, with the Liberals unable to balance their desire for working class support with their resistance, or the resistance of their historic supporters, to the growing strength of the unions.

The inability of the Liberals to wrench themselves from their inherited moorings in the middle classes left working people, with their increasingly strong sense of separate identity and organizational capacity, effectively disfranchised. Into this vacuum the Labour party stumbled—stumbled in a very serious way, because it is impossible to detect any particularly keen
political intelligence running through the party's organization or appeal during this period, nor can one find any particularly dramatic transformation of consciousness among working people. What there was, between about 1910 and 1924—the era when Labour replaced the Liberals as the major opposition to the Conservatives—was an assertion of the strength and separate interests of the existing working class and its institutions and culture, not what would normally be called a "radicalization" of the workers. The effect, nonetheless, was quite a radical break with the past in terms of political allegiance, and in terms of the possibilities for political action for ordinary people.24

The Labour party, in short, won the allegiance of the leaders of the working class and its organizations, and of working people generally; but more because the other major parties defaulted on the project of enrolling the workers than because of the success of its own efforts to win political and ideological support. This does not mean that there were not hundreds of dedicated socialists in and around the Labour party performing prodigious feats of proselytizing. It was these people, in fact, who provided the core of activists that truly built the party in the localities and sustained its inner life. It was these people too, who served as the crucial links between Labour, the unions, the co-operatives, and the many informal institutions rooted in working class neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, these rank-and-file socialists were always in some sense atypical, both of the working class and, in a curious way, of the party. They were unusual among workers in that they tended to represent a stratum of more skilled, organized, educated and "respectable" workers whose socialist commitments further set them off from the bulk of the class-conscious but largely apolitical members of the working class. They were not representative of the Labour party, insofar as the party's programme did not embody the sentiments of its keenest supporters but rather a set of uneasy compromises between various brands of socialists, trade union officials and leaders of the party in parliament. Inevitably there were struggles over the party's outlook and policies, and in those struggles socialists could occasionally make common cause with trade unionists and push the party to the left. But such moments were exceptional, primarily because the role of the trade unionists in the party has normally been monopolized by politically cautious officials.
The result was a party that was replete with local activists with firm socialist commitments, yet operating with a programme only vaguely reflecting those commitments. Not surprisingly, this contradiction produced, on the part of Labour's broader base of electoral supporters, an allegiance based on ties of class loyalty rather than political outlook. This would mean, of course, that the fit between the outlook and policies of the party, and the attitudes and beliefs of working people would be highly imperfect, and in general, much less close than the organizational links between the party and the class.\textsuperscript{25}

Only to the extent that the party's thinking was fuzzy and unclear, and to the extent that its appeals were based upon class identity rather than program, did it reflect what might be called the underlying consciousness of its supporters. This rather vacuous and negative compatibility would serve Labour well enough when the fortunes of the party and the class were for one or another reason on the rise, but it would do far less well in periods when the climate was unfavourable.

Unfortunately, the climate remained distinctly unfavourable to working class advance throughout the inter-war years. The series of industrial and political defeats suffered by Labour and the unions in the early and mid-1920s weakened the institutional strength of working people, and dampened the enthusiasm and confidence of the class. It thus hindered further efforts by the leadership of the working class to capitalize on the potential, created by the links between Labour and the class, for political mobilization. On the contrary, the slump which crippled Britain's most important industries throughout these years further eroded the unions' strength at the workplace, and helped to put off even further into the future the realization of the promise of the immediate post-war years.

Eventually conditions did, of course, alter in Labour's favour. The boom in armaments before and during the war created a new prosperity that allowed for a massive increase in the strength of the unions. Beyond this, the political conjuncture of wartime greatly benefitted Labour. The Conservatives' identification first with the long slump, then with appeasement, then with the inadequate waging of the war during 1939-40, ultimately disqualified them from post-war leadership. The circumstances virtually dictated that Labour, and only Labour, would be positioned well enough to benefit from the more or
less independent upsurge of popular radicalism which grew out of the organizational successes of 1939-43, and which affected nearly all of society during the last two years of the war against fascism. The result was the enormous Labour victory of 1945 and its successful period of rule during 1945-51. That moment represented the triumph of a politics and a party whose great strength derived not from its program or ideology, but from its links to the working class.26

If this was the strength of Labour up through 1950, it was also to become the source of its weakness thereafter. That is because the pattern of social and economic change since 1950 has been such as to erode, not the working class itself, nor industrial organization, but rather the role which the institutions created by working people over many years play in their daily lives. This, in turn, has meant that the sense of living within a common, shared culture, sustained by a common set of class-specific institutions, has lessened as well. This sense of commonality, this “collective idea”, as Raymond Williams once characterized it, had by 1945-50 made the translation of class membership into Labour support almost automatic for working people.27 Since then however, the declining saliency of those common institutions and the way of life built around them has made Labour support less reflexive, more considered and hence more problematical overall.

The argument can perhaps be clarified by distinguishing it from accounts normally offered of social changes since 1950.28 Most commentators, including Hobsbawm and most of the participants in the debate over Labour, typically harness evidence documenting certain facts about social change—most, though not all of them, relatively non-controversial in themselves—to conclusions about changing class structures. These accounts take note of such trends as the enhanced security afforded by the welfare state, the long-term rise in material standards and consequent spread of mass consumption, the growth of white collar occupations, increases in social and geographical mobility, and the alleged decline in working class family and community networks; and from these, proceed to argue that the working class has begun to decompose and become in some sense “bourgeois”. The argument made in this paper differs in two important respects. First, we resist the temptation to label such social changes, when and where they have in fact occurred, as
social structural; and prefer instead to view them as changes in what Giddens has called the “proximate” determinants of class awareness. Hopefully this shift in terminology does not have the effect of making these changes seem any less important in people’s daily lives, for that is not the intention. The intention is to find a way of discussing these transformations, and particularly their consequences, that is more open ended and nuanced than the terms used in much of the present debate. In fact, the second difference between the argument offered in this essay and others, is that we would see most of the social changes since 1950 as having potentially as many positive effects as negative upon the prospects for class politics. More precisely, the very same set of social facts or tendencies can be seen very differently if one asks about their impact upon the institutional and organizational setting, within and through which class is lived and experienced. The welfare state, for example, has provided state support against old age, unemployment and disability, and it has given access to health care, education and a variety of other services that were previously obtained through working class organizations or informal networks of self-help. This has meant an improvement in provision, but also less need to rely upon class-specific provision.

The rise in income has had the same effect, though in a much more diffuse way. Money means not having to rely upon credit from the neighbourhood grocer or pawnbroker; not having to rely upon help from neighbours and kin during short-term unemployment crises; and being able, for the first time for many working people, to participate in the process of buying and consuming goods for personal use that distinguishes contemporary society. It also means not having to restrict one’s leisure activities to a night at the local pub, or to Sunday lunch with the family. In sum, it has meant the development of what Williams has more recently and hesitantly labelled “mobile privatism”. What matters though, is not the label, but rather that one should not interpret this transformation entirely negatively, in ways that assume only a decline from the era when working people had no option but to confine themselves and their needs to what could be had within the narrow bounds of the working class community. For most working people in fact, the transformation has been grasped as a form of liberation from the exclusions and deprivations of the past.
There are, to be sure, some places where the older working class institutions and styles of life have remained strong and vital. The miners' strike, for example, brought out incredible displays of local solidarity reminiscent of an earlier era. It showed that in many communities in the mining areas, much of the established structure of institutions and social networks has continued to play a critical role in daily life. But it also revealed the limits, both geographical and political, of this older type of solidarity. Even many miners, it became clear, were not so solidly embedded in local networks and institutions as to be able to withstand the enormous pressures to return to work. Equally important, the response of other workers and of the Trades Union Congress revealed the limited appeal of that sort of industrial politics within the class as a whole.

It does seem therefore that recent changes have led to a bypassing of those institutions which once distinguished working class life, and in consequence some diminution in the saliency of collective provision and certain styles of class awareness and class expression. On the other hand, they do not on the whole seem to have led to the creation of an individualist ethos, or to the destruction of the ties of friendship or kinship among working people. Virtually all of the studies on working class attitudes since the war show that enhanced expectations and desires for material improvement coexist comfortably with a sense of how to achieve such goals that is thoroughly non-individualist. There has been little or no increase, moreover, in those types of behavior or beliefs which have been traditionally associated with middle class notions of personal advance and self-improvement. Nor does there appear to have been any noticeable weakening of awareness among working people of social inequality or of the sense of "relative deprivation".31

Studies of family life tell a similar tale. Several studies, for example, have shown the gradual spread of more egalitarian relations among working class husbands and wives. No doubt genuine equality is still a long way off; and no doubt the prolonged economic crisis through which the country is being put will impose severe strains upon relationships among the poor and the unemployed. Nevertheless, the changes seem to be in the right direction, and this pattern tends to reinforce other sociological findings to the effect that, overall, relations with family and kin have not deteriorated or atrophied since the war.
Nor, it appears, have typically middle class styles of sociability or civic participation penetrated to any significant extent among working people, whether they live in older inner-city areas, council estates or new private housing. What has changed is the need to rely upon family, kin or neighbours in times of distress. While there is no reason to think working people are any less willing to help a friend or family member than in the past, there is not the regular and pressing necessity of calling upon one's family and friends for help in the normal course of life's daily crises.

In other words, the changes which so many social scientists point to as causing the break-up of the working class certainly have occurred, but their immediate social effects seem far more ambiguous than theories of "embourgeoisement" or "affluence" would allow. Their most direct effects, moreover, have not been upon the consciousness or psychology of working people, but upon the role of the older working class institutions and the ways of life centered around them. Rather than label this a transformation of class, as terms like "embourgeoisement" imply, it would seem to make more sense to regard this as a change in the relationship between the working class and society. The changes of the post-war years have, in a very real sense, made British workers into citizens: they now have claims to minimum standards of welfare and health as a matter of right; and they also, at least until recently, have had the income with which to participate in a meaningful way in the citizenship-by-consumption that is the main benefit of contemporary capitalism.\textsuperscript{32}

The notion that what distinguishes the working class in contemporary Britain is an enhanced citizenship, interpreted and fulfilled in a very material fashion, is further suggested by the pattern of change in industrial relations since the war. Two facts stand out: the first is the impressive growth of union membership; the second is the increase in strikes since the mid-1950s.\textsuperscript{35} What is so remarkable about the pattern of union membership is that British unions held their own during the 1940s and 1950s, when the trends in occupational and industrial structure could easily have produced a decline. Even more remarkably, membership actually increased during the 1960s and most of the 1970s, when social and economic trends became even more adverse. Throughout the early post-war
years, employment contracted in industries like mining, ship-
building and textiles where the unions were strongly rooted,
and grew in industries like engineering and motor cars where
unions were relatively weaker. Yet the overall level of mem-
bership remained about the same, which meant that for every
miner or shipbuilder lost to the unions, there was a new recruit
from one of the newer industries. In the 1960s and 1970s,
the older industries continued to decline and the locus of
growth shifted decisively to the service sector, and within that
sector, to white collar occupations. But the unions managed
somehow to enroll a large number of these new workers, so
that the level of unionization of the workforce actually in-
creased from 44.2% in 1965, to 55.4% in 1979.

These achievements in union membership were accom-
panied by a revival of strike militancy. This militancy was first
concentrated in the engineering and motor car industries—
and among the miners, of course—but it subsequently spread
to most other sections of the workforce. It initially took the
form of “unofficial” strikes, and hence was linked strategically
to the elaboration of a network of shop stewards’ organizations.
Government efforts to control the militancy helped to broaden
and politicize it. Many factors—lots of them local and specific
to individual plants—contributed to this explosion of strikes,
but the critical factor seems to have been an escalation in
material wants; that is, a desire to make more money. This
desire, or at least its expression, was a novel one among British
workers, and this was certainly the first time that it could be
backed up with any serious industrial clout. It seems for this
reason to have taken the leaders of the unions and the Labour
party by surprise. Especially upsetting was workers’ willingness
to act on such desires, even in the face of pleas or threats
from union officials and leaders of the party.

These trends in industrial relations are difficult to reconcile
with notions of “affluence”, “embourgeoisement”, or “class
decomposition”. They might, though, be subsumed under a
notion of enhanced citizenship, for what was really at stake in
the spread of organization to new workers was a claim, on
their part, for greater rights at the workplace. The demand
for higher wages among Labour’s traditional trade union sup-
porters—especially the skilled workers—was similarly a claim
to fuller participation in the consumer society visibly growing
up all around the workers.
The Labour party failed to come to terms with these novel aspirations among working people—some Labour leaders viewed them with undisguised contempt—and so Labour failed to extract political benefit from the growth of the unions and the increase in strikes. Still worse, Labour's response actually served to produce a weakening of support among those who were traditionally is most loyal backers. This was due to the fact that, while Labour's incomes policies and its attempts to curb local unofficial action were directed largely against such workers, it was precisely among those workers that the older ties to Labour were being most rapidly eroded. It was, after all, among the established communities of highly-organized industrial workers that the workers' institutions had been strongest. The decline of those institutions, coupled with workers' declining identification with what remained, left working people without the daily, nearly-spontaneous reinforcement of political allegiance from whence Labour had so long drawn its sustenance.

Labour's difficulties have been compounded by those features of the Labour party that were once sources of strength. Its non-ideological character, for instance, now retards its efforts to win votes, whereas before it probably helped. Its programmatic vagueness, again probably a plus during earlier times, now makes the party very poorly fitted for electoral competition. Worse still, the party's penchant throughout the post-war years for calling upon its best supporters to make sacrifices on behalf of Labour-sponsored incomes policies has made the party's politics appear positively inimical to the further enhancement of working people's material citizenship, at least to some. Nor, finally, do Labour's intellectual inheritance and established ways of operating make it particularly attractive to those new groups—women, minorities, public sector workers—to whom they have been trying to appeal.

In sum, the crisis of Labour seems not to derive from changes in the class structure per se. Instead, it stems from the weakening of the separate identity—based upon a set of separate institutions and networks rooted in the community—that had grown up among the urban workers. That identity has been eroded by the public provision of services, and by the attainment of higher incomes. The effect upon Labour has been to weaken substantially those once strong and multi-
stranded links between it and the working class. The connection is now maintained only by the unions—and if the Thatcher government has its way, even that strand will be broken—and union membership by itself no longer translates into an allegiance to a class-based political party. Labour, moreover, has not been able to establish other links between itself and its supporters to substitute for those that have been lost. Neither its programme, nor its organization, nor its style of work while in office have been altered to cope with its diminishing ability to command the allegiance of working people. Until they are altered, attempts to recapture that allegiance are likely to fail. And yet, any attempt to recreate the old connections will also surely fail—as will the mere reassertion of the old rhetoric—without the infrastructure of organizational linkages. The old alignment was built upon solidarities forged in response to a kind of deprivation and exclusion peculiar to a particular stage of class formation. No one can make it real again—although the Conservatives under Thatcher seem to be trying—nor would anyone genuinely seeking to advance Labour’s cause wish to see a return to that aspect of the past.

If it is to resolve its present crisis, Labour must find other grounds for its appeals. Just what these should be remains to be seen, but the argument of this paper would suggest that three things are necessary. First, leaders and activists in the party must rid themselves of nostalgia for the days when class and party were so happily identified. That identity was an outcome of the tortuous process by which workers, as a class, became a genuine presence in the political and social life of the nation. The completion, more or less, of that process means Labour can never again count on the sort of loyalty which once grew so naturally out of the daily lives of workers. Second, Labour needs to come to terms with the rather pecuniary fashion in which working people have defined and made use of their enhanced citizenship in recent years. Third, it would seem that the grounds for Labour’s future programme and appeal must involve an attempt to extend still further the economic and social citizenship that is the one great legacy of Labour’s historic rise to power.
Notes
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1. The dimensions of Labour's decline have been documented in detail by political scientists. For a useful summary of their analyses, see Dennis Cavanagh, ed., The Politics of the Labour Party (London, 1982). The causes of the decline and the prospects for reversing it have been very widely debated, especially in the pages of Marxism Today, New Socialist, and the New Statesman. The most serious exchanges have been sparked off by two essays by Eric Hobsbawm. The first appeared as "The Forward March of Labour Halted?," Marxism Today (September, 1978), and was reprinted, along with numerous criticisms and Hobsbawm's response, as The Forward March of Labour Halted? edited by Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern (London, 1981). The second appeared as "Labour's Lost Millions," Marxism Today (October, 1983). It was again followed by an intense debate, to which Hobsbawm responded in "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?," Marxism Today (March, 1984).


8. For a review of this literature, see Erik Wright, Classes (London, 1985), chapter 2.


11. The difficulty was, of course, recognized quite early on. Thus Goldthorpe et al. felt compelled to add an appendix to The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour (Cambridge, 1968) explaining how instrumentalist orientations could result in increased industrial conflict when expectations of pecuniary advance were disappointed. But this was an afterthought and served primarily to underscore the outdated character of the "affluent worker" argument even as the books documenting it appeared. Even if the explanation of industrial conflict offered by the authors of the "affluent worker" studies...
is accepted in general terms, it is singularly unhelpful in explaining the precise forms taken by industrial militancy in the late 1960s or its increasing politicization. On these issues, see J. Cronin, *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London, 1979); Leo Panitch, *Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy* (Cambridge, 1976); and Michael Moran, *The Politics of Industrial Relations* (London, 1977).


14. On the continent, both the German and Austrian working classes evolved extensive social and cultural organizations linked to social democratic parties. It seems, though, that the close connection with the socialist parties made these organizations less inclusive than they might otherwise have been. Moreover, their very presence stimulated strong counter-movements and rival organizations among paternalistic employers and, most important, among Catholics. In Britain, by contrast, the fact that the social and industrial organization of the working class largely preceded its political organization probably had the effect of making the former more inclusive, at least within specific localities and occupations.


20. For two recent attempts to make such a comparison, see Hartmut Kaelble, *Social Mobility in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Europe and America in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1985); and Arthur Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA since 1930* (New York, 1980).


Cronin/Class and the Labour Party

25. This has guaranteed that Labour has had an internal life quite distinct from other parties and that its integration into “high politics” was never complete. On this, see Kenneth Morgan, “The High and Low Politics of Labour: Keir Hardie to Michael Foot,” in High and Low Politics in Modern Britain, eds. M. Bentley and J. Stevenson (Oxford, 1983), pp. 285-312.
28. A useful overview of these changes is Arthur Marwick, British Social History since 1945 (Harmondsworth, 1982).
31. The points made in this and the following paragraph are based upon my review of the major surveys of working class attitudes and behavior since the Second World War. For a fuller discussion, see Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-1979, pp. 146-79.
33. Clearly Marshall and most others who use the term “citizenship” have believed that the extension of citizenship to economic and social matters would also normally mean the extension of social provision. It was thus anticipated that the effect would be the “decommodifying” of social relations. That has happened only in certain limited spheres. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the term may still be usefully employed to refer to the new set of rights that working people came to enjoy, or at least to expect, in the post-war period. If I read them correctly, this is the sense in which both Goldthorpe and Marshall et al. have used the concept.
34. For the key data on industrial relations since the war, see G.S. Bain and R. Price, Profiles of Union Growth (Oxford, 1980); Cronin, Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain; and J. Durcan, W. McCarthy and G. Redman, Strikes in Postwar Britain (London, 1983).