

Working Class Attitudes toward Work

McClelland, Keith. "England's greatness, the working man." *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class Gender and the Reform Act of 1867*, edited by Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Of course there are considerable unresolved problems about assessing living standards in the period which make analysis of the precise shape of change difficult and, perhaps, ultimately impossible. What we know about standards of living is extremely patchy. Notoriously, figures for real earnings that take account of periods of unemployment, short-time working or overtime and, on the other side, costs of consumption (primarily food and rent) are extremely hard to come by. This is to say nothing of the qualitative aspects of standards of living such as changes in the hours of labour and intensity of work. There are figures: and it certainly does seem plausible that at least some groups of the working class became better off; much qualitative evidence clearly suggests it.

But the question of living standards and changes in real wages becomes more complex when we consider changes in the incomes not simply of particular trades and occupations but of households. After all, most working-class people lived in households of more than one person and most in families of one kind or other. The critical points are what were the incomes of households and how did these change over time? Here things become much more difficult because we know so little about the earnings of women and of children and young people, especially where people were earning part-time (either on a regular basis or for only certain parts

of the year). The problem can be illustrated with a simple arithmetical example: if we take a household with only one (male) breadwinner, he may be earning a wage which puts him within the 'labour aristocracy'-- say 30s (£1.50) a week, On the other hand there may be a household where a man is earning only 20s (£1.00) but where his wife earns 10s. The total household income for the two households is, of course, the same; but the one has been cast as 'labour aristocratic', the other as merely part of the unskilled or labourers. There may of course be persistent differences of status; and there may also be regional differences here. Thus the male workers of the north-east of England-- miners, ship- builders, engineers and the like-- generally appear to have lived in households in which relatively few women worked for wages, at least on a discernible basis. On the other hand the proportion of married women working for wages in Lancashire was relatively high: by 1870 or so the north-east was high-pay area whereas male wages in Lancashire were perhaps generally a bit lower.

At the same time, a major associated change in this period was the widespread sense of the permanence of urban, industrial and capitalist society, and yet its persistent insecurities. It came to be widely assumed within the working class that the future of waged workers and their families was very largely determined by the future of the economy-- its continuing expansion through commerce and industry, preferably within a free-trade regime-- and the extent to which workers could extract collective and individual gains from the system through trade unionism and collective bargaining, or through varieties of self-help. Symptomatic of this was the virtual disappearance from the 1840s onwards of aspirations to establish co-operative production, be they in the form of the ambitious schemes of the Owenites of 1833-4 or the more modest co-operatives of small groups of artisans.

Yet the world of the working class was also one in which scarcity and insecurity were persistently dominant features of their lives, Chronic insecurity was a basic fact of life for all, even for

the apparently best paid, and shaped the behaviour and attitudes of all, both as individuals and where they were able to operate collectively in trade unions, friendly societies or other institutions. All knew that gains in wages or favourable changes in the conditions of work might be merely temporary, As Robert Knight of

105

the Boilermakers' Society put it, workers must 'make the best of the sunshine we now enjoy, for as certain as night will return, so surely will the clouds of depression again surround us with gloom, loss of work, and consequent suffering to ourselves and families'.

Changes in the working class and the sense of both the permanence of industrialism and the insecurities of the system were crucial to the beliefs not only that the future of the economy was central to the future of men and women as workers, but also that the sphere of the economy itself was in some considerable measure a distinct one, governed largely by the laws of the market, and that the interests of workers were essentially dependent upon their position as economic beings: being working class was largely a matter of economics rather than politics.

This constellation of ideas was considerably reinforced in this period by cultural and ideological changes. Central here was the changing valuation of 'work' and its associated meanings. There was a widespread emphasis upon the moral bearings of work across the whole society. As Collini has suggested of the respectable Victorian middle-class man, 'work was the chief sphere in which moral worth was developed and displayed'. And those who spoke for the working class frequently emphasised the virtues of work not only in making the wild deserts blossom but also in demonstrating the claims of working men to respect for their skill, intelligence and contribution to national well-being. The Boilermakers' Society could proclaim 'England's Greatness, the Working Man' while John Burnett, leader of the Nine Hours' League in the north-east in 1871 and subsequently general secretary of the ASE, declared the engineers to

have always been an intelligent body of men. At the present time a higher average of intelligence and education prevails amongst them than we find in the trades of any of the great productive trades of the country. Their work requires both skill and intelligence, and the best workmen are really scientific artisans, working under conditions which require the exercise of the very highest faculties of brain and hand.'

Yet the valuation of work depended crucially upon not only its role as a prime source of individual and collective identity for men, but also in

106

the increasingly sharp differentiation between the virtues of paid work for men and women. It had been widely assumed until about the 1830s that working-class women should work for wages and even that it might be desirable to do so. However, within the following decades there was an increased emphasis among working-class men, and perhaps among working-class women, that married women should not work for wages. To a degree this reflected the great pressures exerted upon the working class from within both the state and civil society to exclude or restrict women from certain kinds of work-- the Mines Act of 1842 and the Factory Act of 1844 are the critical pieces of

legislation-- while it also reflected and was reinforced by male trade union advocacy of the family wage.

At the same time what was lost in this period, as compared with the years from 1825 to 1848, was an alternative valuation of work in relation to the economy and society as a whole. In that earlier period there had been a flourishing popular-radical critique of the existing social order and its economic foundations. However, in the decades after 1848 there was an assimilation of many of the dominant ideas of orthodox political economy, at least to the extent that it was assumed that the market ultimately determined labour's rewards. This did not entail the complete acceptance of political economy, but it did reflect and affirm the hegemony of 'purely' economic calculation rather than customary-market and 'non-economic' valuations of labour by trade unionists and others. Trade union action and collective bargaining continued to have an important moral element: the establishment and enforcement by collective action of the rate for the job entailed notions of mutual aid as well as instrumental solidarity; and the typical claim for a 'fair day's wage for a fair day's work' carried ideas of reciprocal duty and justice in relations between employers and workers. However, moral considerations were increasingly subordinated to market ones. As the wage was believed to be ultimately determined by the 'laws' of supply and demand, collective bargaining would not be able to transcend these 'laws' but establish what the 'traffic would bear'.