

## CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

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John Foster: *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson. pp 346. £6.00)

**THIS** is an important book by a **marxist** historian which will have a considerable influence upon the work of social historians in the future. In a number of ways, this is a pioneering work, and its use of sophisticated quantitative techniques for the dissection of urban social structures will serve as a model for subsequent research workers. It is, however, a difficult volume to read; for one thing it is awkwardly organized around the experience of three towns—Oldham, Northampton and South Shields, with the greatest amount of space and attention being given to **Oldham**; and for another the analysis is densely argued but discontinuous, so that one has to jump from one section to another to obtain an overall understanding of the author's approach.

The theme of the book, in the words of E. J. Hobsbawm who contributes a Foreword "is an enquiry into certain central features of British industrial development, and into the nature of both the Victorian bourgeoisie and the working class. More generally, it is an attempt both to clarify and to provide analytical and preferably quantitative methods for investigating the concept of 'class consciousness'." In the author's own words (p.1), "the main problem with which the book is concerned, [is] the nature of the change which English capitalism underwent in the middle years of the last century. Many terms have been used to describe it. It has been made to represent 'liberalization', the achievement of mass citizenship, the arrival of a mature industrial society. And from another viewpoint, the coming of social imperialism, the emergence of a labour aristocracy and a decisive shift within the economy from the export of commodities to the export of capital."

The three towns he studies were chosen because they represented different forms of economic organization and a different tempo of economic and social change. **Oldham**, "the central town of the study", was an important segment of the cotton industry, the earliest factory sector in the British economy:

**"Politically, it had a continuing history of radical activity from the 1790s to 1848. It was one of those areas where the United Englishmen had a mass base in the 1800s**

and during the guerrilla campaign of 1812 it was the scene of a two-day battle between armed workers and troops. Throughout the second quarter of the century the town was more or less permanently under the control of the organized working class; much of its local government was subordinated to the trade unions, the new poor law was unenforced for well over a decade, and radicals like Cobbett and Fielden were elected as MPs. This situation did not change much until the end of the 1840s when the town moved remarkably quickly towards class collaboration and a 'labour aristocracy' type of social structure" (pp. 2-3).

By contrast, Northampton and South Shields, with industrial structures still for the most part technologically unrevolutionized and a range and depth of poverty greater than Oldham's, had a working class that never achieved anything approaching the degree of radical intervention in local politics that obtained in Oldham; and Foster uses these towns as "controls" against which to set Oldham's experience. His analysis before the late 1840s is concerned with the emergence of working-class consciousness, and its varying ideological content, and after 1850 with the argument "that liberalization was in fact a collective ruling-class response to a social system in crisis and integrally related to a preceding period of working-class consciousness" (p.3).



He begins, in chapter 2, with a brief but useful account of Oldham's "entry" into industrialization, making, inter alia, two important points. The first, that the early generations of mill-owners came from families who already had money; and the second, that Oldham at least provided no basis for the argument that Nonconformity was the entrepreneurial driving force behind the shift into industrialization. The controversial section in this chapter relates to Foster's short analysis of the origins of English industrialization, and although this is not central to the book's main themes, it will be commented upon here as an example of certain general weaknesses in Foster's approach. One of these is the narrow base of secondary source material on which he relies. A refusal by any historian to produce a book from other historians' writings is to be welcomed, and in any case Foster's own study of Oldham is inevitably grounded in original sources, and these he has explored in great depth. But as will be remarked upon later, his reluctance to place his own work in the context of previous writing has led him into error in some parts of his analysis, and nowhere is this more strikingly illustrated than in the brief discussion of the pre-conditions for the development of industrial capitalism in Britain. To come to the point, it is Marx whom Foster ignores and the classic analysis of British industrial origins in the concluding section of Vol. I of *Capital* finds no echo in his pages. Since most marxist historians in this country (with the outstanding exception of Maurice Dobb) have also ignored the greater part of Marx's analysis

as it relates to the 18th century in particular, it is worth pursuing the matter further through Foster's own approach. He sums up his general thesis:

"England's pioneer industrialization seems, then, to have involved the following elements. Underlying the whole process, but not explaining it, were the general factors common to all Europe: the slow, spasmodic advance of agricultural productivity; the recurrent but abortive bursts of merchant capitalist production; and the new type of colonial surplus. Then, providing the necessarily devious escape route, came the factors that put England ahead. First, there was the out-of-step pattern of population growth that brought a boom in cheap labour, capitalist production and bourgeois revolution. Next, there were the conditions that enabled the capture of Europe's colonial surplus, the long-term maintenance of capitalist forms of organization and continuing industrial and agrarian innovation. Then, finally (after the over-investment in colonial primary production had brought a collapse in colonial profits) one gets the massive switch of investment back to the home industrial sectors in the 1770s and 1780s: back in order to exploit the crucial super-profit techniques developed in the previous two generations. At this point, with all three basic preconditions fulfilled (labour, raw material and market) industrial revolution could begin" (p. 18).

Foster, in fact, gets half-way to a Marxist analysis. In the paragraph which follows the quotation given above he notes (a) that industrialization did not bring about any fundamental change in social structure, for that change had already occurred and (b) in general, before industrialization began, "all essential capitalist institutions were already old". What he misses is Marx's central concept of primitive accumulation by which Marx was referring to the emergence of new forms of both capital and labour as the fundamental prerequisites for industrial development. Using British experience for his model, Marx's pre-conditions involved the expropriation of the agricultural producer from the soil—"the basis of the whole process"—and the concentration of property into relatively few hands, with its conversion into capital for industrial development. It is the elimination of the peasantry from the social structure of the countryside that is one of the central dynamic factors in British economic development; the emergence and growth of a capitalist, market-orientated agriculture being a product of the same historical process of change. Marx's analysis is set out clearly and coherently in Part VIII of Vol. I of Capital, and in all its essentials the model that he presented has been confirmed by later research. Foster's own analysis is jejune; he makes use of concepts such as "lucky breaks" to explain the differences in internal development between Britain and Europe. Whatever its merits—and many of the points he makes will be fully acceptable to most kinds of historians—his theoretical analysis is not that of Marx.

The fourth chapter in this volume and of central importance to the whole work is titled "Economics of Class Consciousness". It is preceded by a chapter which describes the ways in which the working class community in Oldham secured control in certain key sectors of local politics, notably the police and poor law administration, and developed a "labour community" which was "closely related to extra-legal unionism and involved a massive cultural reorganization of the working population" (p.72). It is the shift into "a deeper political awareness"—from a labour consciousness to a class consciousness—that forms the theme of Chapter 4. Foster uses "class consciousness" in a very special and narrow meaning, as a synonym for "revolutionary consciousness". This is what he says:

**"Obviously one cannot make the same tests for class consciousness as one could for a living population. But one can get some measure of the *process* by which, if it was class consciousness, it must have come about. If Oldham's militancy was indeed of this nature—the result of a mass realization of demands for a total change of the social system—then it could only have developed in very special circumstances; those in which the community's revolutionary vanguard was able to break out of its structural isolation, get access to labour as a whole, and convince people that radical political change was the only solution to their problems. And this, to an extent, is something we are able to test" (p. 74).**

"A total change of the system", "the revolutionary vanguard", a mass conviction of the need for radical political change: obviously it is possible to define class consciousness in these ways, but it must not be assumed that these are the only ways. There is the "economist" consciousness that Lenin was writing about in *What is to be Done* and there are degrees of class consciousness which stop at varying distances from revolutionary consciousness. This last is a fairly rare phenomenon; limited normally to a minority even in critical historical situations; hence Lenin's well known conditions for a successful revolutionary uprising. But there can be no objection to Foster's definition, once it is clearly understood, and we turn now to his analysis of how this (revolutionary) class consciousness came into being, and what was its precise intellectual and political content.

There were two main periods in Oldham which radicalized the workers. The first was down to about 1830 when the handloom weavers were still larger in number than the factory workers. The "repeated and deepening crises" of the weaving trade and the general technological imbalances within the cotton industry as a whole radicalized the Oldham working class at least to the point of what Foster describes as a labour consciousness. It should be remarked in passing that Foster never makes specific what the content was of this pre-1830 ideology. It is notable, for example, that although it is clear from the text that the handloom weavers were a central group in the pre-1830 years, exactly

what their ultra-radicalism consisted of is never examined. But the second phase of the processes of radicalization after 1830 had a quite different background (p.80). The numbers of handloom weavers were now fast declining and the whole industry was rapidly becoming mechanized within an economy that was still technologically under-developed. It was this basic contradiction between the advanced technology of cotton and the very much slower technological rate of change outside the cotton sector that provides the background for the crisis in which the industry found itself. While investment and productivity made rapid progress in cotton, "the effect was merely to reduce the exchange value of the industry's output without any balancing reduction in the labour cost of inputs from other sectors, especially food and machine goods" (p.80). The consequences for the cotton industry were a long-term decline in the rate of profit and a series of worsening crises. In the 1820s, Foster notes there was only one bad year of depression (1826), while there were four in the 1830s (1831, 1836, 1838-9) and five in the 1840s (1841, 1842, 1846, 1847-8); and during these periods "anything up to 30 per cent of the labour force would be out of work". Over the whole period from 1830 to 1850 there was "an almost uninterrupted drop in the real wages of the largest section of adult male mill workers, the cotton spinners", who found themselves "the principal victims of the industry's almost suicidal economics". In a later comment Foster generalizes the situation as "the hard, intractable *trend to crisis* into which the cotton industry became locked after 1830" (p.109). He sums up:

**"This, then, was the experience of the 1830s and 1840s: deepening crisis; repeated employer attacks on living standards and conditions; lengthening periods in which the whole basis of industrial society appeared to be breaking down" (pp. 834).**

It is necessary to look closely at Foster's understanding of the cotton industry in the second quarter of the century for it is indeed crucial for his later analysis of social consciousness. There are two separate but related problems to be considered. One is the facts of the cotton industry's situation as they affected working class living standards, and the second is the historical evaluation of the cotton sector within the general framework of the British economy at this time. Were its economics "almost suicidal"? and was the industry trapped within a "hard, intractable *trend to crisis*", and what happened to the crisis?

But first, the facts of life of the cotton operatives, and here there is no disagreement. As against the large number of apologists for these decades, Foster provides a careful statement of the trends in real wages, housing and living conditions and the incidence of sickness. His family and household analysis taken from the 1851 Census schedules is especially notable, and offers a new dimension to the study of urban

poverty in the mid-century. Living standards—as a broad generalization—were worse in Northampton and South Shields than in Oldham, but in all three they were appalling. "While in Oldham the proportion of working families below the subsistence line at any one time was about one-fifth, the proportion in Shields was over one-quarter and in Northampton over one-third" (p.96). The striking feature of the cotton industry is the decline in wages during the thirties and early forties, and the fact that in some years—1841–2 especially—unemployment was very high. There is no doubt, therefore, of the material oppression and the stresses and strains that were imposed upon the cotton operatives during these decades; and in the context of the political evolution of the British working people from the 1790s, the growth and deepening of a radical consciousness was only to be expected.

When one turns from living standards to the wider historical evaluation of the cotton industry, there are serious criticisms to be made of Foster's judgements. The generalizations that he gives us—"a deepening series of crises" (p.80); "the industry's almost suicidal economics" (p.82); "lengthening periods in which the whole basis of industrial society appeared to be breaking down" (p.84); "the hard, intractable trend to crisis . . . after 1830" (p.109); "the classic sequence of industrial capitalist crisis" (p.124)—all suggest that the cotton industry in particular, and perhaps industrial society as a whole, were rapidly approaching the abyss of total breakdown and collapse.

The first comment to be made is that anyone using language of this kind to describe the cotton industry of the 1830s and 1840s has grave difficulties in explaining the remarkable, and relatively smooth, expansion of the industry after 1850. If the cotton industry was subject for so long to "the classic sequence of industrial capitalist crisis" how did it come about that it solved its problems so rapidly at the end of the 1840s? Foster might have addressed to himself the question which Marx put to Engels in 1857, after the crisis of that year:

"I must say all the same, however, that the way the mass of overproduction which brought about the crisis has been absorbed is by no means clear to me; such a rapid ebb after such a violent flood tide has never occurred before." (*Correspondence* (1934 ed.), p. 116.)

Except for the declining rate of profit argument—which is admitted—Foster offers no serious account of the inner crisis of the cotton industry between 1830 and 1842, the period with which he is mainly concerned; and his general treatment of the economics of the industry is perfunctory and superficial. What he misses—and misses completely—is the paradox of crisis and growth co-existing during the same years; the presence of serious contradictions, including the heavy social costs,

within a framework of rapid development overall. These paradoxes reside in the nature and character of the cotton industry within the general context of British industrialization during the first half of the 19th century; and it is a history which goes much beyond the simple categories which Foster himself uses. The growth of the industry in the second quarter is very remarkable and the fact cannot be reconciled with Foster's apocalyptic statements. Some basic data are set out below:

#### EXPORTS

	Raw cotton imports (million lbs.)	Piece goods (million yds.)	Thread (million lbs.)	Nos. employed factory workers (000s)
1820	152	251	0.4	126
1830	264	445	1.2	185
1840	592	791	2.8	262
1850	664	1,358	4.4	331
1860	1,391	2,776	6.3	427

(From: B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (1962) pp. 180, 182, 187.)

These are not the statistics of an industry locked in insoluble crisis, although to be fair to Foster he uses the word "intractable" rather than "insoluble". Not only were foreign markets growing fast during the first half of the century, but so was the home market, and the ability to switch from one to the other (as in 1839 for example) acted as part cushion to the industry. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the cost structures of cotton firms which brought about a high level of investment, rapid growth of output and employment against a background of falling profit margins, but the materials for analysis are abundant; and the published works of Matthews, Blaug and S. D. Chapman, to mention only three of the leading writers of the last twenty years, provide a coherent explanation of the apparent paradoxes involved. There is, however, a comment of a general kind to be made relevant to the wider considerations of social history in these middle decades of the century: the paradox of the cotton industry writ large in terms of British society as a whole. What is at issue here is the nature, character and dynamic of industrial society in the first sixty or seventy years of its existence. After 1800 industrialization developed in extremely jerky, uneven ways; the institutional framework within which the new industrial relations expanded was weak at many points, and in par-

ticular in the banking sector, a continuing source of instability until the 1850s. The contradictions of growth in new sectors or technologically revolutionized sectors, and decline or extinction in others—all within a total context of very rapid overall development—produced the economic and social tensions with which all historians of these decades are familiar. The social and human costs of early industrialization were immense, and no one has documented them in more bitter detail than Marx in *Capital*; but this immense human suffering occurred within a society that was growing economically at a very fast rate; and one of the central problems of 19th century history—the social, political and intellectual changes around 1850—can only be understood if the full complexities of the first half of the century are appreciated.



Foster's narrow and in part inaccurate account of the cotton industry does not, however, vitiate the general argument he is making. The "social being" of the mill workers of Lancashire was such that it produced a consciousness of class, an hostility to the established order, a desire for change that was all part of the wider national shifts in consciousness of the years to 1850. As E. P. Thompson has described the process:

**"In the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers. This ruling class was itself much divided, and in fact only gained cohesion over the same years because certain antagonisms were resolved (or faded into relative insignificance) in the face of an insurgent working class. Thus the working-class presence was, in 1832, the most significant factor in British political life."**

It is Foster's argument that before 1830, the working people of Oldham developed what he calls an "occupational solidarity" or a "labour consciousness"—what E. P. Thompson understood by "an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers"; but that after 1830 this labour consciousness deepened into a class consciousness which in Foster's definition is a synonym for revolutionary consciousness. This is the issue. Certain of the key passages in the argument have been quoted above. Foster relates this qualitative change to the worsening economic crisis in the cotton industry after 1830. The new factor in consciousness is an "intellectual conviction" of a different kind from that which obtained before 1830; and he believes it to have been consciously willed. "If it can be shown", he writes "that the development of a mass movement was in fact closely linked to the careful, conscious process by which the radicals guided mass understanding from one level to another, then we will be well on the way to establishing the key element of intellectual conviction" (p.109). To establish his general thesis that an intellectual

conviction of a new kind came to be part of the political thinking and attitudes of working people, he selects two episodes from Oldham's history: the first, the events of 1834, and the second, the general strike of August 1842.

On 25 November 1833 a conference at Manchester founded the Society for National Regeneration. It represented a coming together of Robert Owen and John Fielden, the latter the Todmorden cotton master who was such a valiant supporter of the Ten Hours movement. The Manchester Conference accepted five resolutions which ended with a call to establish the eight hour day on 1 March 1834. Fielden persuaded William Cobbett—his fellow MP for Oldham—to publish the scheme in the Register, and the committee appointed by the Conference included George Condy, proprietor and editor of the Tory Manchester Advertiser, Philip Grant the radical journalist, and John Doherty. The last named was the most important personality in the movement, for it was he who had the confidence of the Lancashire cotton operatives and trade unionists. The Regeneration Society met with considerable support in Lancashire but with opposition elsewhere, especially in the West Riding, where the leaders of the Ten Hours movement were hostile on the grounds of the political impracticability of the scheme. These Yorkshire leaders were highly sceptical of the use of industrial action to achieve a shortening of hours, because of the absence of mass support, and in the event they were proved correct. While there is still much research to be done on this short-lived movement, it would seem that Oldham was the locale where the most militant confrontation took place with the authorities. Two trade unionists were arrested on the evening of 14 April 1834, and by the 20 April the town had become a military camp. The Oldham operatives, according to Foster's account, went on strike for two weeks in support of the Regeneration Society's demand for an eight hour day, but elsewhere action was ragged and partial, and the whole movement soon collapsed. For Foster the episode is central to his general thesis:

**"It plainly reveals the ease with which radical leaden could move from industrial to political struggle without losing their mass support and also gives an unusually sharp focus to their ultimate objectives. What it may not establish as fully as one would like is the element of mass conviction. In view of the sequence of events, it could be plausibly argued that the wider mobilization sprang more from the attack on trade union rights than any belief in a new social order" (p. 114).**

With this last argument Foster is more than half-way towards throwing away his case; and the whole episode needs to be assessed in the context of the period in which it occurred.

First, the ideology of the Regeneration Society. Late 1833 and the first half of 1834 represented a point in time when various strands in

the national movement came together to provide the dynamic for mass activity on a very large scale. The conjuncture of militant trade unionism and Owenism, inspired by a range of political and industrial ideas which included Benbow's advocacy of the General Strike, the advanced politics of the *The Poor Man's Guardian*, and the syndicalism of *The Pioneer*, had brought the working class movement to new levels of consciousness and mass action; but anyone coming fresh to Foster's account of this period in Oldham would have no understanding of the national background to the Oldham events, since it is simply ignored. The central phenomenon of this period: the astonishing rise and fall of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union is not mentioned (nor is the name to be found in the index); the seminal discussions in *The Pioneer* on the part which the unions could play in the achievement of a new social order are similarly missed; and in general what happens in Oldham takes place in a national vacuum. But neither the events in Oldham nor the ideology of the Regeneration Society can be understood without reference to the history of the Ten Hours movement or to the ferment of ideas which provided, not a symbiosis, but a temporary union, between Owenism and industrial class politics, and which, by the summer of 1834, had collapsed. The quotation which Foster gives from a speech of John Doherty (*Herald of the Rights of Industry*, early April 1834) is an excellent example of this mixture of militant unionism and Utopian ideas:

**"We have now arrived at a most important crisis. . . . You are to be the artificers of your fortunes. Philosophers may write, politicians may struggle and your friends labour in vain. Unless you yourself now put your hands to the work in good earnest all will prove unavailing. If you are not emancipated now, immediately, the fault is your own. We say solemnly and emphatically Strike! . . ."** (p. 111).

And so on. Foster suggests that the ideas of the Regeneration Society were at once "practical" and "totally subversive". It all depends, of course, upon how one defines "practical". Eight hours a day would not have ruined British industrial society in the 1830s, although it would certainly have materially slowed down the rate of capital accumulation; and John Fielden's other ideas of investment boards and control of output were also not beyond a theoretical application. But "practical" meaning politically practicable is quite a different matter, the point in doubt being the readiness or otherwise of the factory workers in general to withdraw their labour in support of the eight hour day. It was just on this issue that the Yorkshire left-wing radicals like Peter Bussey joined forces with Parson Bull in opposing the plans of the Regeneration Society. The totally subversive argument is also difficult to sustain. In the sense that all such programmes, however Utopian, were totally subversive, stemming as they did from a

total opposition to the existing order, the term can, rather guardedly be accepted; but it can hardly be accepted for the actual programme of the Regeneration Society which is limited in its aims and objectives and silent on such key questions as the nature of state power and the political agencies by which control of the state may be obtained. In a later discussion Foster half recognizes the point which is being made here, when he refers to the "somewhat unsystematized economic analysis" and the "lack of Leninist rigour about state power" (p.148); although it must be said at once that the use of "Leninist" is anachronistic and unhistorical.

It is, in fact, impossible for the reader to evaluate and assess the "mass conviction" of the Oldham workers in the early months of 1834 and during their two week strike because Foster provides no evidence of what their ideas were, or of the events themselves. Was it really a mass mobilization of Oldham workers during this two week strike? (which incidentally the Webbs and Cecil Driver state was a strike of one week). There is not a single incident quoted during the strike period itself except for a meeting on 18 April which Doherty and others addressed; and the lengthy reports in the Times, which the Webbs referred to, or from the *Leeds Mercury*, are not noted in the sources used.

The second episode that Foster uses to confirm his approach is the general strike in the industrial north of August 1842, usually referred to as the Plug Riots. This is a well known story; it took place against the background of widespread economic depression; and it represents a high point, probably *the* high point, of mass action during the Chartist period. The national context within which the events of 1842 took place is only very briefly touched upon in Foster's text and again no one without previous knowledge would be able to appreciate the complexities of working class politics as refracted through the Chartist movement at this time; and for Oldham the information is even more meagre. Foster admits that "we only know a very little of what was said" by Oldham radicals during the crucial days of August 1842 (p.117), but this does not prevent him from being categorical about the nature and purposes of the strike in the town:

**"It was clearly a political one to gain what amounted to State power. Support had to be won on these terms beforehand and the process of achieving it plainly involved discussion and argument on a mass scale. What is more, it is also clear (as it should be if we are really dealing with class consciousness) that the success of such arguments was closely linked to the immediacy with which the cotton industry's economics reflected—and could be shown to reflect—the contradictions of the overall system" (p. 117).**

Now some of these points are acceptable from what is known of the national debates within the Chartist movement, although the general

understanding of state power and political agency among working class groups seem to me to fall a good way short of Foster's confident generalizations. But he is concerned with **Oldham** and the political consciousness of the **Oldham** working class, and one is bound to repeat once again that his readers are not provided with the facts upon which his generalizations are founded. There is indeed throughout his discussion of labour or class consciousness a sharp contrast between the imprecision in terms of the evidence offered and his positive and often dogmatic generalizations about their meaning.

There are other matters that must be briefly touched on in this present context. One is the political character of the two **Oldham** MPs in the early 1830s, **Cobbett** and **Fielden**. Foster has only a brief discussion (p.69ff.) but the implications of his text suggest that both men were sympathetic towards, indeed were almost integrated within, the developing class consciousness of the **Oldham** workers. In certain important matters (factory legislation, opposition to the New Poor Law, hostility towards the new police forces) there was, of course, a complete rapport between the **Oldham** radicals and their MPs. But there is a good deal more to be said about both **Cobbett** and **Fielden**, and it would have illuminated some important parts of the "consciousness" thesis to have explored in detail the relationships between the **Oldham** working class and **Fielden**, the great humanist mill-owner, and the extraordinary, marvellous and inconsistent bundles of ideas that united themselves within the personality of **William Cobbett**. In these middle years of the thirties both men were certainly articulating the hopes, aspirations and general oppositional attitudes of **Oldham** working people; but neither was "class conscious" in the sense that Foster uses the term. And who were the "vanguard" of the **Oldham** working class between whom we are told close contact was maintained with their MPs in London? (p.69).

Chapter 5 of this volume, "Class Struggle and Social Structure" is largely devoted to the description and delineation of **Oldham's** working class leadership. What Foster is concerned to prove is the presence of a "revolutionary vanguard [which] was able to break out of its structural isolation, get access to labour as a whole, and convince people that radical political change was the only solution to their problems" (p.74). This, omitting the use of the term "revolutionary vanguard", fits exactly the achievement of the Chartist leadership in the later thirties and forties. **Feargus O'Connor** was its outstanding representative, and **O'Connor** is mentioned only in passing in the text and will not be found in the index; another example of the way in which Foster refuses throughout his book to connect the events in **Oldham** with the movement in the country as a whole. What we are given in this section on **Oldham's** working class leaders is detailed but

limited statistical information on **occupation, political** and industrial activity, support for this movement and that, which when put together provides the bare bones of political biographies. It is the result of patient and intensive research, but the conclusions which can be drawn from all this work are by no means clear. Foster establishes a high level of continuity of radical action throughout the first half of the century; he shows that **Oldham** working people of different occupational backgrounds had a considerable degree of "social closeness" (pp.125–31); and he attempts to describe and define the radical leadership. It is in this last section, central to his argument, that the impressionism of parts of his analysis—despite the apparent hard-headedness of his approach—shows itself most clearly. There are several important sections of this book where a straightforward chronological history would greatly help readers to assess the evidence for themselves, and the lack of a continuous argument is often very confusing.

Let me discuss in some detail the leadership question after 1830. This is the period which sees the shift to class consciousness and as noted above Foster concentrates on the two events of 1834 and 1842. In his words, a "new political unity" emerged after 1830: "three distinct social groupings can be distinguished . . . the continuing group of working-class radicals, the shopkeepers and publicans, and a number of small employers" (p.133); but within this leadership the working-class radicals "largely dictated" the terms on which radical politics were conducted. Foster discusses at some length the shopkeeper/publican group and the small manufacturer group; but there is almost no analysis of the working class radicals. We are told who they were: "The key men remained roughly the same throughout: Knight, **Fitton**, Haigh, Mills, Swire." These (with the exception of Mills) are among those listed in Table 8a on pp. 151–2 which includes the main working class leaders from 1795 to 1830; and the names appear again in the much longer list in Table 8b on pp. 154–9 which relates to the post-1830 years. Both Tables provide minimal biographical details. Knight was a small manufacturer who became a schoolmaster; **Fitton** was a weaver; Haigh a cotton spinner and later a small shopkeeper; and Swire a clogger and trade union leader. We are given a short biography of Knight (p. 139) but of the others we have nothing save the bare details in the two Tables mentioned above. Foster admits that he lacks "complete information", and therefore:

**"any attempt to build up coherent groupings of working class leaders by matching particular campaigns and slogans. . . can really only be used as a rough backing for more impressionistic findings" (p. 131).**

This lack of any information does not, however, prevent him from insisting in a number of places that a "Vanguard" did exist; that an

intellectual commitment was "the really decisive factor": and that while the movement's theory was "somewhat unsystematized economic analysis [and lacked] Leninist **rigour** about State power—the key point is that it worked" (p.148).

This really will not do. We are offered nothing which helps us define the political ideas of this working-class leadership, and the two quotations from Knight could have been spoken by any advanced radical of these years; there is no indication at all of the place and role of these **working-class** leaders in the radical movement of **Oldham** except the unsupported assertion that they dominated it; if they did form a vanguard in the usual sense of the word we can only take this on trust from the author, for no facts are provided; and the repeated insistence upon a class consciousness of a revolutionary kind remains, as noted already, wholly unproved. Indeed, from the confused history in this chapter it looks as though Alexander Taylor of the shopkeeper group was one of the outstanding personalities in **Oldham** during the 1830s and 1840s. He was apparently very close to John **Fielden**, but we have no basis of fact to judge the relationship between Taylor and the group of working-class radical leaders. Who led whom in these twenty years remains undisclosed.

That there **was** a competent and continuous leadership in **Oldham** seems to be established at least on *a priori* grounds. The radicals' control of the police and poor law administration, and the extensive and successful use of exclusive dealing as an extra-legal weapon of coercion, could not have come about without an **organized** radical commitment of a high order; but its social definition, structure, and change over time will not be discovered from this text.



This review has concentrated upon some parts of the **Oldham** story before 1850. It would be unfair to the author not to make clear that there are many aspects of this book which have not been touched upon, and which are of great interest. There is a fascinating chapter on the **Oldham** bourgeoisie, and the discussion in the last chapter of the fall away from the pre-1850 consciousness after the middle of the century provokes many questions for this reviewer but no fundamental disagreement. The argument of this present essay is not to deny in any way the existence of a definable class consciousness before 1850, but to dispute the hard, dogmatic categories which Foster seeks to impose upon his material. There were elements of revolutionary attitudes within the general class consciousness of **working** people, and some of their leaders, both before and during the Chartist period, but this has long been recognized. What there was not was a single strand which can be defined as a "revolutionary class consciousness" and applied as

a blanket term upon a single movement at any one point in time. In theoretical terms Harney and Ernest Jones get nearest to it after the failure of the movement in 1848. Certainly for **Oldham**, for which town Foster has proved his case as an ultra-radical centre, the argument for the shift to mass revolutionary attitudes, inspired and led by a proletarian vanguard, cannot be accepted—on present evidence at least; and his insistence upon this analysis makes it all the more difficult to understand the changes of the late 1840s "when the town moved remarkably quickly towards class collaboration and a 'labour aristocracy' type of social structure" (p. 2).

Marxist historians will welcome the renewed emphasis which Foster's book will encourage on the definition of "social being" as the necessary starting point for the more complicated analysis of social consciousness. But while many of the questions he asks will at once enter the discussions of historians of this period, the immediate answers he has given will not, unfortunately, command universal agreement. His analysis of the economics of the cotton industry is no more than partial; his understanding of the dynamics of industrial capitalism in Britain during the second quarter of the century is severely limited; and the analytical jump that he makes from social being to social consciousness conceals a large gap which the evidence presented wholly fails to bridge. Foster quotes with approval the Russian scholar Porshnev who insisted that "it is language—the particular social codes which determines what information is (or is not) acceptable—which forms the keystone of any culture" (p.124); but it is precisely the failure to define and then to examine language and ideas that makes Foster's argument for a mass revolutionary consciousness in **Oldham** so unconvincing.

*Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* is a book that will deservedly be much debated among 19th century historians. It will stimulate a much needed shift towards local and regional studies of a new kind: far removed from chronological antiquarianism. Foster's use of quantitative techniques in the analysis, for instance, of "social closeness" or of inter-class relationships are valuable pointers to what can be done with local records. The arguments, and the tone of the arguments will be heard in all future discussions, for the emphasis upon "hard" social facts will prove a very necessary corrective to much of the writing that passes for intellectual and cultural history today. The dialectical relationships between social being and social consciousness are among the central concerns of the historian, and this present volume makes a vigorous, controversial and interesting contribution to the debate.