

**The social map of Britain has changed much more than the Left realises. The working class is not what it once was. And the regions now look very different from twenty years ago. The implications are enormous**

Doreen Massey

## The Shape of Things to Come



*A man who has spent all his working life at East Moors steelworks in Cardiff is now employed to help demolish it*

### THE CHANGING COMPOSITION OF THE WORKFORCE

The British labour-force is not what it was 20 years ago. The immediate disaster of Thatcherism has thrown into high relief major changes in its composition. Employment in manufacturing has collapsed since the 1979 election. Skilled manual jobs are being cut back drastically. There has even been a drop in the total workforce. It has felt like devastation, and it has been. But the intensity of the effect of Tory policies should not blind us to the fact that underlying them are longer run processes of change. The working class, and the labour force more generally, are undergoing structural changes in composition.

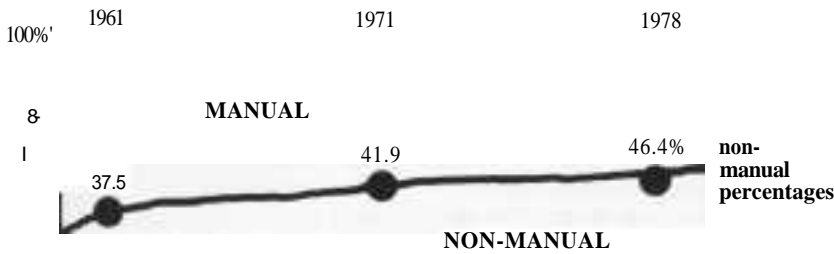
They are profound changes, profound enough to mean that some of the old ways of thinking and working are no longer adequate

or appropriate. The labour movement too, if it is to keep ahead of events, must restructure itself, recognise the shifts, address new questions.

But it is not only the social composition of the labour force which is changing. Its geography is also being transformed. The urban and regional structure of the Britain of tomorrow (even after, that is, some recovery from Thatcher) will be different from what we have come to know, and to know how to work within. Regional divisions are being broken down. To be sure, the old north/south divide is being reinforced in terms of voting patterns, but it is not the same old north/south divide of the 30s. Further, the pattern in which most working class jobs, particularly in manufacturing, were gathered in the towns and cities is crumbling. 'Rural areas' are no longer places without major non-agricultural employment.

This changing geography compounds the challenge facing the labour movement. The changing location of industry breaks down established relations between workplaces, and between workplaces and communities. And the new locations are different. The factory 'or office is situated in a different context, to which previous forms of organisation may be inappropriate. Geographical change can, in other words, alter the wider social context of the politics of the workplace at the same time as the social composition of the workforce itself is changing. And, indeed, the two processes are related. The geographical reorganisation of British capital has been fundamental to all its attempts over the last 20 years or so to become more competitive, hold down wages, restructure itself out of crisis. Geographical restructuring has already been important to capital, and it should be important to labour.

Figure 1: The changing balance between manual and non-manual workers.



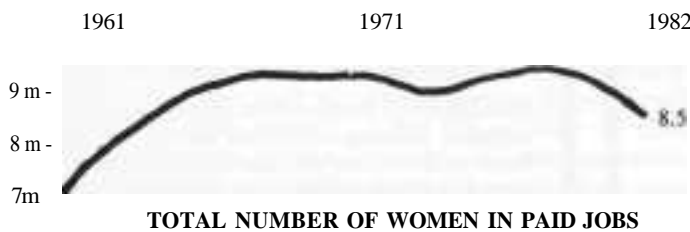
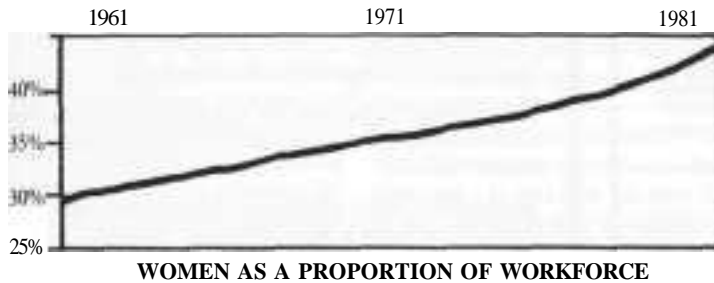
Source: calculated from Warwick University Manpower (sic) Research Group.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Occupational changes 1961-1978 (% of workforce)

Source: <sup>1</sup>Warwick Man-Power Research Group

	1961	1971	1978
Administrators, managers	6.6	7.8	8.7
Professionals	6.6	8.1	9.8
Engineers & technicians	3.5	4.2	4.7
Clerical workers	14.0	15.0	15.9
Craft workers	19.7	17.6	15.9
Skilled operatives	3.2	3.1	2.7
Other operatives	22.9	20.4	18.5
Personal services	8.9	10.5	11.2
Other	14.6	13.4	12.5
	100	100	100

Figure 2: Women in the Workforce



**WOMEN IN SELECTED OCCUPATIONS**

% female	1961	1966	1971
White collar workers	44.5	46.5	46.2
Manual workers	26.0	29.0	28.6

Sources: ACE data; Censuses of Population

**The national level**

At the national level there have been significant changes in balance between different elements of the workforce. Figure 1 shows one of the divisions which has long been central to labour movement organisation — that between manual and non-manual workers. Manual workers, from having made up over 60% of the working population in 1961 are now down to only about 50%. This change in the shape of the labour force has been going on throughout the postwar period — manual workers having declined by about 5% as a proportion of the total workforce in each postwar decade. To some extent what these figures reflect is the loss of jobs in manufacturing. This too is now a well-established phenomenon. The number of jobs in manufacturing in 1961 was 8.2m. Since then it has fallen by a quarter and, from 36% in 1961, manufacturing now makes up only 28% of jobs in the economy.

These major shifts are mirrored in the changing occupational structure of the workforce. Within the generally expanding non-manual groups, it has been the higher-status jobs which have been growing fastest as a proportion of the total workforce. And this growth has been accompanied by shifts in the internal composition of each group. The particularly rapid rise in importance of professionals, for example, has been due especially to public sector expansion (we are talking here of the last 20 years!) in health and education. Similarly that wide spectrum of occupations referred to in the table as 'engineers and technicians' has seen engineering-based professionals, draftspeople and so forth, dwindling in importance, while the computer whizz-kid and the research scientist increase in both numbers and status. The managers and administrators have expanded in all parts of the economy: public sector and private, manufacturing and services. In contrast, the increase in the number of clerical workers is not so marked — each clerical worker is evidently now supporting more professionals. The declining groups reflect the obverse of these processes. And here, too, there are significant shifts in the internal composition of each category — the generally declining 'other operatives' group, for instance, includes a growing army of assembly workers.

**Participation of women**

Perhaps best known and most important is the increased participation of women in the paid workforce. Figure 2 gives some details. The rise in the number of women in the labour force has not in fact been steady (the figure for 1982 is actually below that for

1964). But the increase in the proportion of the workforce which is female has been far more consistent. This obviously reflects what is happening to male employment — the recent dramatic collapse of jobs for men resulting in a rise in the importance of women in the workforce even though their own numbers were shrinking too.

## A new geography is in the making

But these are all national changes. They are substantial enough as they stand, but they also hide a lot else which has been going on. For these national changes are highly differentiated from one part of the country to another and very different kinds of class changes and shifts in social composition are under way in different regions. A new geography is in the making.

Behind this new geography lie a number of interlocking processes. Each of them is related to long-term shifts in the economy as a whole and to the changing place of Britain in the international system. They can, roughly, be divided into two groups: elements of the geography of decline on the one hand and the emergence of new patterns on the other.

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF DECLINE

The pattern of employment decline in Britain today is actually the result of *two* different patterns, the one superimposed upon the other. On the one hand there is the long term decline of a range of 'old basic' sectors; on the other hand there is the newer, though by now also well-established, loss of employment in manufacturing. These two waves of decline hail originally from different periods, each reflecting the previous dominance of different international divisions of labour, and different structures of the British economy. Each, too, has its own particular geography.

### The thirties revisited

First, there is the long term decline of jobs for men in the old basic industries of the Development Areas — South Wales, Central Scotland, the North East of England. The loss of jobs in industries such as coal mining and shipbuilding, which once formed the economic core of these areas, has been going on for much of this century. It was the collapse of these pillars of Empire which lay behind the regional concentrations of unemployment and the appalling poverty in these areas in the 30s. (Unemployment rates in the South East were relatively low). And it was

the sudden and rapid loss of jobs in these industries (particularly shipbuilding) which heralded for British industry the end of the long postwar boom and, with that, the re-emergence of 'the regional problem'. Since then the loss of jobs has varied in pace and been modulated by economic climate and political strategy. The contraction of this central element of the working class, then, is long term, and it has had and continues to have a very definite geographical pattern. It is the decline of employment in these industries which is at the heart of the 'traditional' form of the British regional problem.

But that well-known pattern is now being overlaid by another, equally dramatic, pattern of decline.

### Deindustrialisation

Deindustrialisation — reflected in the loss of jobs in manufacturing — has hit the headlines under Margaret Thatcher. But it, too, is a longer term phenomenon. The absolute *number* of jobs in manufacturing has been shrinking in the UK for nearly 25 years now — ever since the mid-1960s. And manufacturing's *share* of total employment has been declining for far longer.

Deindustrialisation is certainly of a different order under this government. It has accelerated, and it has spread to virtually all

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manufacturing sectors. Moreover, it is not just employment, it is also output which is now falling. In the late 60s job loss in manufacturing took place in a context of rapidly rising productivity and technological change (it was the age of the white heat and productivity agreements). Today far more of it is due simply to the closure of capacity. So there is no question but that what is happening now is of a different order. But the decline of jobs in manufacturing is not itself a new phenomenon.

Now, the geography of the decline of manufacturing is very different from that of the decline of the old basic sectors. For one thing, it is more general — it is not confined to two or three regions of the country. But it does have a definite geographical pattern. The first areas to be hit by deindustrialisation were the cities. Greater London has seen the most spectacular falls. Every 5 years from 1961 to 1976 200,000 manufacturing jobs were lost from the city's economy. By the end of last year the number of manufacturing jobs in the GLC area was only two-fifths of what it had been in 1961.

A large proportion of the overall decline of jobs in urban areas has in fact been due simply to this decline of manufacturing industry. There has been a relative 'shift' of employment from bigger cities towards smaller towns and more rural areas. But the term 'shift' (the term most frequently used) can give the impression that the whole thing took place through actual geographical movement. It didn't. Much of it has been a process of differential growth and decline. A large part of the loss of manufacturing jobs in major urban areas has taken place through straightforward closure, with no new investment elsewhere — or certainly not in the UK.

### Decline of the cities

The loss of manufacturing jobs in the cities has not, for the most part, been because they had a high proportion of jobs in industries which were declining fastest nationally. It was not, in other words, a result of the cities' industrial structure — as it was the industrial structure of South Wales and the North East which lay behind the collapse of their employment in the 30s. The cities suffered most because, *within* particular industries, they tended to have the oldest factories and the oldest production techniques. Most of all they had the lowest levels of labour productivity.

There were other reasons, too. In a number of cases we studied in the late 1960s, management argued that it was easier to close a plant in a large and complex labour market than in a smaller town — the job losses are absorbed, the unemployment diluted, and less 'blame' gets pinned on the individual company.<sup>2</sup> It was also the case that workers in the cities had often won higher wages and, in manufacturing industries, were better organised than those in more out-of-town locations. Whether explicitly motivated or not, the decline of manufacturing industry in the cities has certainly taken with it some of the old bastions of trade union strength.

But it is not *only* the cities which have been hit. As deindustrialisation has accelerated, it has spread both to more and more industries and to more and more places. The regions which have been worst affected have been those with the greatest reliance on manufacturing. The economies of the engineering-based regions, in particular the West Midlands and the North West, have been shattered. Manufacturing employment in the North West has been falling since the early 60s, gradually picking up speed to lose 20%

between 1966 and 1976. In the West Midlands manufacturing jobs carried on increasing until the early 70s. But in the four years from 1978 to 1982 each of those two regions lost over 200,000 jobs, a further 20% of the manufacturing workforce in each case.

### The changing map of unemployment

So two contrasting patterns of job loss, stemming initially from very different eras, have in recent years been superimposed upon each other. The result is that the map of unemployment is now very different from the one we have been used to since the 30s. Some elements have acquired an apparent permanence — the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland is now almost 20%. But the rates in the North West and the West Midlands are now above that of Scotland. Only the South East stands out as significantly better than the national average. And that itself conceals enormous differences. Within each region, the inner cities of the major conurbations have rates of unemployment far above the national average. In London most inner-area boroughs have more in common with inner-cities elsewhere than with the outer-metropolitan area.

### THE SHAPE OF THE NEW: GEOGRAPHICAL RESTRUCTURING

But it is not all decline. The employment which remains is also being restructured geographically. And the sectors which are growing (at least over the longer term) have very different geographical patterns from the ones they are replacing. The way industry makes use of the British space is being reorganised. This process has been particularly marked since the mid-60s when pressures of increasing international competition and a shifting world order began to enforce a restructuring of British industry. That restructuring has changed a number of times in both its form and its pace in the years since then. But its net result has been to produce a major shift in the social geography of the workforce. The geography of each element of that workforce is being reorganised. And this is happening at the same time, remember, as the balance between these different elements is also shifting (Table 1).

The changing balance of corporate structures in the economy is reflected most obviously in the changing geography of management. This is discussed next. Having established that framework, it is then easier to examine the internal reorganisation of the rest of the workforce, concentrating here on the categories of production and clerical workers, and scientists and technicians.

### The geography of management

Look first, because it is the simplest, at the changing geography of management. At the heart of this change is the increasing size of individual companies and the growing dominance of the top few hundred firms. As firms have grown there has been a tendency for their head offices and upper echelons of administrative, marketing, financial and legal staff, etc, to be split off spatially from production, and increasingly the tendency is for them to be concentrated in London and the south east of England. As Table 1 showed, this stratum of managerial and associated groups has been expanding as a proportion of the national population, and it should be stressed that employment in this kind of white collar work has been growing in all regions.

But as it has grown it has also become more highly differentiated, both functionally and socially; management hierarchies have lengthened. And hand in hand with this increasing social differentiation has gone increasing geographical differentiation. The lengthening managerial hierarchies, with their associated hierarchies of functions and social status, have been stretched out over space. And the geographical pattern has taken on a very definite form — the higher level functions, the ultimate control over production, over the relations of economic ownership and possession, and the upper echelons of social strata with which such functions are associated — are increasingly concentrated in the bottom right-hand corner of the country. In 1977, 350 of the top 500 UK companies had their headquarters, and therefore all their top management, in London and the South East. In contrast, the lower the level of management, the nearer to actual production it tends to be geographically. And while HQs concentrate in the South East, the corollary is that other regions are increasingly becoming 'branch-plant' economies.

### Decentralisation of production and clerical jobs

In contrast to what has happened to management, and contrary to a long and dearly-held thesis on the Left, the concentration and centralisation of capital in ownership terms has *not* led to the geographical concentration of jobs in *production*. Indeed at precisely the same time as the concentration (both spatial and a-spatial) of ownership and control has been going on, the location of production itself has become more decentralised, both within individual regions, outwards from cities, and from the south east and midlands of England to the regions of the north and west.

Some of this relative shift has been

associated with changes in the technology of production. In a whole range of industries the kind of technological change which has been going on over the last 20 years or so has been associated with a changing demand for labour. Industries such as telecommunications, parts of electrical engineering, and electronics, are the most obvious examples. In such industries, both changes in the product (eg, in telecommunications from electro-mechanical to semi-electronic switching gear) and changes in the production process towards more highly mechanised techniques or techniques involving major assembly stages have gone along with a shift in the kind of labour employed. The archetypal shift is from male manual workers classified as skilled to female assemblers classified as unskilled or semi-skilled.

Such changes in the social composition of the labour force are often accompanied by geographical recomposition. They have 'freed' industry from its traditional sources of labour in the old centres of manufacturing skills and have been part and parcel of a significant decentralisation to pastures, and

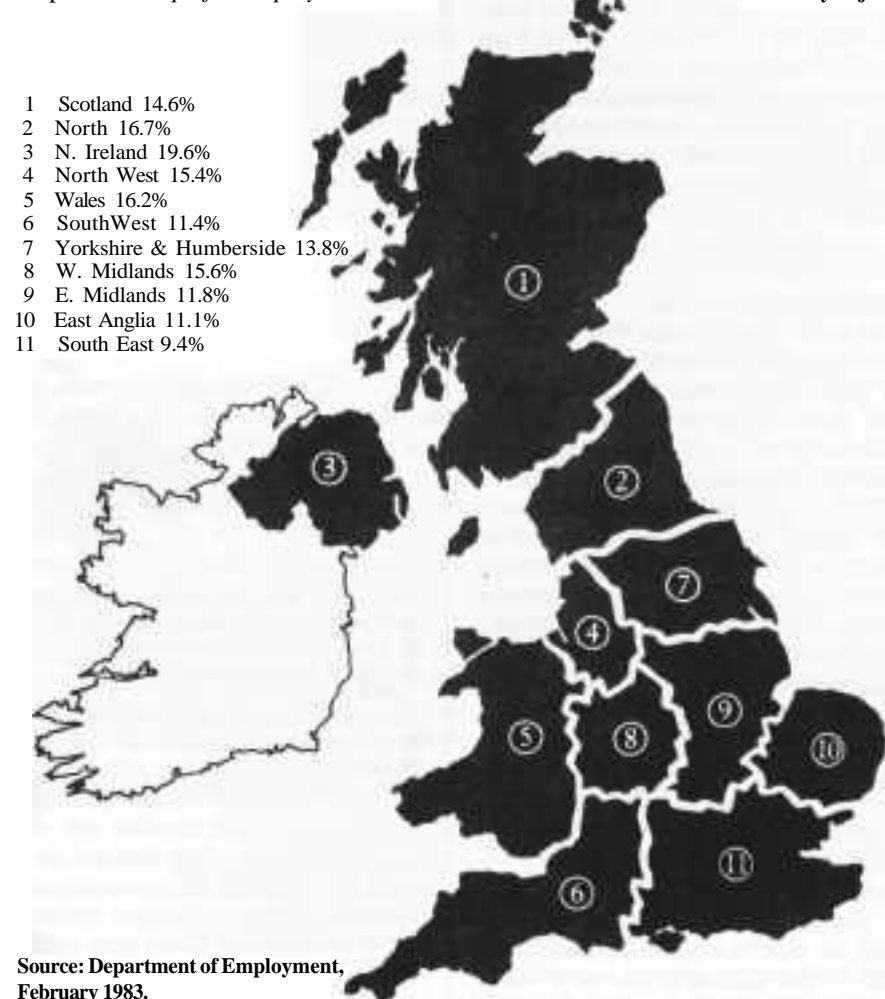
labour forces, new. The existing workforce has been abandoned and new and different labour employed in areas with no tradition in the industry, or indeed any industry at all. The social recomposition of the labour force, changes in the technology of production, and changes in location are in such cases integral to each other.

### The service sector

Technical change has been one significant force behind the decentralisation of production, but it has not been the only one. There has also been a significant outward movement of manufacturing jobs, particularly jobs traditionally done by women, but where there has been little technological change in production. Here the driving force has been to find cheaper sources of labour. The clothing industry is a good example. In the 60s it was caught in a vice. It was under competition from low-cost imports. But its own usual supply of women workers in urban areas (particularly London) was threatened by the expansion of the service sector. Big firms in the industry solved the

Map 1: *The map of unemployment: 1983*

Seasonally adjusted



Source: Department of Employment, February 1983.

dilemma by changing location. New sources of labour, more vulnerable and with fewer alternative sources of employment, were sought out. The new source of labour was older, married women, the new locations were smaller towns, trading estates and sometimes quite isolated locations in the peripheral regions of the country — the rural areas such as the South West and old heavy-industry areas such as the coalfields.

Nor has it just been manufacturing which has decentralised. Not many years later the service sector adopted the same strategy, and new geographical patterns of employment were developed there too. Both clerical wages and office rents decline once you get further than about 60 miles from London, and from the 1970s departments of the central state and large private sector firms began decentralising the more routine elements of clerical work. Clerical workers are an increasingly important part of the labour force (see Table 1), and this decentralisation is therefore a significant element of its changing geography. Longbenton in the North East is a classic example — 6,000 clerical workers process you through the DHSS here. Driving licenses are issued by nearly 4,000 similar workers in Swansea. In some areas, such as the North East, this has represented an increase in jobs available to women where there had been precious little before. In other cases the service industry arrived to compete with others, in the East Midlands, for example, chasing the shoe industry (with many of the same pressures on it as in clothing) even further north.

### Scientists and technicians

While these changes have been affecting workers directly involved in production, other things have been going on at the other end of the social spectrum. An increasing proportion of the workforce is engaged in research and development and related activities, either in the research establishments of major corporations in a wide variety of industries, or in independent 'business-services' of various sorts (software consultancies, for example), or in the newly-developing hi-tech sectors. To some extent the growth of this element of the workforce is bound up with the same technological changes which produced the deskilled and decentralised production jobs. They are the necessary counterpoint to that production labour force in a long process of the separation of conception from execution.

And their geographical distribution, too, is very different. As with managerial hierarchies, so with the technical division of labour — the separation-out of a whole series of distinct functions, each related to a

particular social status, has enabled also their geographical separation. The further you are from production in a functional sense the further you can be distanced geographically. The industrial technologists of a generation and more ago had a far more intimate relationship to the actual process of production than do, except in the prototype stage, the emerging technologists of today. And big

## That swathe of tamed rurality which stretches between Bristol, Southampton and round and up to Cambridge

companies have taken advantage of that fact, separating out geographically the different parts of the organisation into hierarchical geographical structures.

### The British sunbelt

The upper echelons of these technocratic strata have increasingly concentrated in a new 'region' of the country — the British sunbelt as it is called, that swathe of tamed

rurality which stretches between Bristol, Southampton and round and up to Cambridge. The outer-outer metropolitan area. In startling contrast to the tedious assembly and clerical jobs which have for years been the main new source of employment outside this belt, and particularly in the old coal and steel areas, these jobs are almost all for graduates, and almost all for men.

And it is not just big companies. It is in this stretch of country that the new — and still small — breed of entrepreneur/scientist is gathered. Indeed it is only in this part of the country that 'the small-firm sector' lives up to its image of entrepreneurship and dynamism. What are biotechnology and software consultancies here tend in other areas to be sweatshops and scrap-metal dealers.

But why this part of the country? Certainly there are some plausible economic reasons; but there are social reasons too, and it is arguable that they may be at least equally important. The attraction of the area originally was a combination of accessibility to London and nearness to defence establish-

Map 2: *The Shape of things to come*



ments. The latter provided both jobs for technicians and contracts for the growing electronics industry. But since then the place has taken off in another way. The research scientists, the technologists, those working in business services, make up the stratum of the labour force most able to choose where to live, and assume that jobs will follow. And they do. And jobs do follow. The region *itself* now has a status, a cachet, attached to it. The highly interlinked and individualistic nature of the labour market for these groups reinforces the tendency to clustering, making it difficult for other areas to compete. (And if they do try they have to do it by projecting the same image — semi-rurality, detached housing, 'good' schools.) A whole new style is being created in living, and working, outside the city.

#### A new geography

Were all these trends to continue, the social geography of the British workforce would be transformed. Map 2 is a caricature, but it helps highlight the magnitude of the changes under way.

Compare it with 50 years ago. The old regional specialisms (cotton, coal, cars) have gone. The main regional contrast, in this future, is between control and conception on the one hand and execution on the other, between the sunbelt and the rest.

Of course in fact the picture is more complicated than this. Much of the old geography remains. The West Midlands, the North West, the big cities and the heavy industrial areas of the North and West, still retain much of their old economic structure. The development of the new geography (as opposed to the accelerated decline of the old) has in fact slowed down over the late 70s, and has been interrupted by Thatcherism. The expansion of technicians and professionals, and their concentration into the sunbelt, was at its height in the late 60s and early 70s. So was the growth of jobs in out-of-town and smaller-town locations. Many jobs for women, in the new decentralised branch plants, have disappeared in the last few years. But the shift towards a new geography is a long term one, and is likely to re-emerge.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL DIVERSITY

The fact that the social recomposition of the workforce also involves geographical re-organisation has a number of implications. Most importantly, it means that completely different kinds of social change can be going on in different localities. Not everywhere mirrors the national pattern — in all likelihood very few places do. The classic picture

of the dwindling and disintegration of the heart of the traditional labour movement is found most clearly in the old heavy-industry and coalfield areas (for instance South Wales). In these areas, certainly, there is the fragmentation of a previous, relatively coherent, economic structure based around a few industries, and a few unions. Here too jobs for women are expanding fast and jobs for men contracting, there is a proliferation of industries and employers, often with little connection to each other, and an expansion of white collar strata.

But it is not everywhere like this. In some more rural areas the numerical importance and the structural coherence of the working class is actually *increasing* over the medium term as a result of the geographical decentralisation of industry. Cornwall is an example. Here, new employment has come into an area where the previous economic and social structure was based around self-employment and small-scale employment in agriculture and tourism. Straightforward wage-labour has been a very much less important element here than in other regions. Today that picture is changing. The traditional petty bourgeoisie is declining fast, and while a stratum of managers and professionals is certainly expanding, so too is the working class.

So the directions of social recomposition can be quite different from one area to the next. 'National' changes can take highly variegated forms across the country. The decline of the old is not always happening in the same place as the rise of the new. And what that means is that different problems are being faced, different battles fought out, in different places.

#### The process of change

And it is important to remember that recomposition is a *process*. What has to be recognised politically is not just some end-state looking very different from what we've been used to, but also a process of social change which may often be difficult and painful. The actual process of change is itself an important determinant of the social and political response.

And this process of change varies locally. Where an area is coming from can be just as important as where it is going to for understanding the political climate. What are apparently similar numerical changes can have very different implications depending on the regional setting. The impact of rising unemployment, for instance, can vary dramatically depending on the wider social context, and on the historical experience of those in the area.

People in the West Midlands are newly

coping with not being the boom centre of the land. To some extent epitomised by the car workers, it has gone from cocky aggressivity to agreeing to new work practices. There is a real shock of sudden vulnerability and eroding status and relative, as well as real, wages. This shock of the new is in total contrast to the weary and deeply-resentful return, yet again, to high unemployment, the status of disaster area, you feel in South Wales, the North East of England or even Merseyside. In London and the South East, the lengthy decline of the East End is apparently more like that of the older regions, but here the context is so different. From Docklands you can see the City and if you venture into town you are faced, still, with well-heeled white collar workers and the denizens of the stockbroker belt.

#### The geography of gender relations

Nor is it just changes in class relations which vary across the country. There is a geography of gender-relations, too. Particularly over the last 20 years, women have been increasingly participating in the waged-labour force in all regions, but the increases have been biggest in the peripheral regions (South West, Wales, Scotland and the North East), both urban and rural, to which jobs have been decentralised. And once again, the numbers don't tell the whole story. The impact of an increase in women's participation in paid employment depends on the prevailing system of gender relations. And this varies a lot between one part of the country and another.

Possibly the extreme cases are the old heavy industry Development Areas, especially the coalfields. The 'decline' of these regions should be assessed not just from the point of view that they were heavily working class areas, and highly unionised, but also from the point of view that they were extremely *male*. As far as paid employment is concerned, the opportunities for women have been extremely limited in these regions throughout the century. This has in part been related to the nature of employment for men, and the status attached to it. The demands put on (female) domestic labour by male work down the mine are enormous. Shiftwork, too, makes it more difficult for both partners to be employed outside the home. The ideology of a sexual division of labour between breadwinner and home-keeper has probably been more firmly entrenched in these areas than anywhere else in the country.

And the associated attitudes spread beyond the domestic sphere. In clubs, in politics, in unions, women have been excluded from all but a very minor role,

perhaps especially in postwar years. Attitudes existed which would be unthinkable in Lancashire, say, or London. The now-mourned homogeneity of the labour movement in these regions was based around a rigid sexual division of labour. And the shift in the sexual balance of the paid labour force has sorely disrupted this established set of practices and relations. So much so, indeed, that the late 60s and 70s saw calls, from male trade unionists, academics and politicians alike, for more jobs specifically for men and, in some cases, less jobs for women — a House of Commons memorandum pleaded that the established sexual balance of employment should not be too severely disrupted.

It is interesting to speculate on the degree to which this highly patriarchal past has been one of the conditions for the threat currently posed to it. Certainly, given the previous reliance on female domestic labour, the decline of male employment was an important condition for the formation of the women of these areas into a 'reserve of labour'. They were, moreover, a particularly attractive one, from industry's point of view. More than almost anywhere else in the country they lacked previous experience of employment in capitalist wage relations. They were real 'green labour'. And their

previous exclusion from public life seemed to make them ideal. To the extent that it was complicit in the rigidity of the sexual division of labour in these regions, and in the exclusion of women from so many social activities, the old traditional heart of the (male) labour movement may well itself have been party to the creation of the new super-cheap labour forces industry was searching out in the 60s and 70s. Certainly, the geography of gender relations has been an important element in British industry's attempts to reorganise geographically; to restructure itself out of crisis.

#### Local politics and national politics

In the 60s and 70s much of the importance of 'local politics' was seen to be in linking the local to the national, the particularities of a local area to the wider underlying mechanisms of a capitalist society. Failure to make that link was often seen as failure of the exercise as a whole. That job is still there, still needs to be done. But it did perhaps lead to a tendency to see *only* the 'wider capitalist system' at work in every local situation. The local particularities were seen as something to be cleared away to reveal what was *really* happening. But part of the importance of local politics is precisely in learning how that 'capitalist system' gets

worked out in people's lives in the detailed specificity of a vast variety of local situations. 'What is really happening' is actually very varied. Unity between those situations isn't constructed only by proclaiming that each and every local change is underlain by capitalism: only, in other words, by asserting 'the general'. It also needs, for a solid foundation, a recognition and understanding of the reality and conditions of diversity, and of the actual processes which link the local particularities.

Geographical diversity matters politically in other ways, too. Above all it can be divisive. It is not just that 'national' changes are reflected in a geographically differentiated form, but that geographical diversity can be used as a weapon in a wider politics. The way this happens can vary, has varied, widely. In the 60s, that combination of technological change and locational change which was mentioned earlier often set workers in one area against those in another, in the context of an individual company. More recently, as that process has slowed down, and high unemployment has spread to more and more places, 'inter-area competition' has become a weapon in the hands of both individual companies and the state. The Nissan episode, with over 100 local authorities competing against each other, has



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been the most glaring example of the former.

More generally, areas compete with each other by advertising the non-militancy of their labour. Regions are blamed for their own decline. The reputation for militancy of Merseyside workers is the most obvious case. In 1978 there was an attempt to draw up a local social contract; in 1979, just after the election, Prior visited the area to announce that if there were no strikes there for two years, some investment might be forthcoming. Only recently, a report on East Kilbride assured would-be investors that the situation was nothing like as bad as they might have thought — an investigation had shown that the workers there were hardly militant at all! And so the vulnerabilities of particular areas are used in a wider battle between capital and labour.

### THE POLITICS OF RECOMPOSITION

The joint social and geographical restructuring of the labour force is, then, producing very different conditions for political organisation and representation from those we have come to know and love. It is easy to feel that all is lost. Indeed a quick survey of socialist thoughts upon the subject of the presently-emerging geography of the working class would indicate a depressing assessment of its potential as a base for organisation.

Certainly we have been witness to the erosion of well-established and familiar bases. To the long decline of the industrial unions of the old periphery has now been added the subduing of the strength of the West Midlands. In many areas the accustomed social infrastructure of organisation has been torn apart by industrial decline. At the intra-regional scale, New Towns are well known for the passivity, in general, of their labour forces. The *process* of geographical recomposition is itself a problem. Much of the strength of the labour movement is constructed around local histories, and their dislocation can produce a sense of placelessness in the strong meaning of that word.

But on its own that negative assessment misses a lot. It is not just decline that is going on; it is recomposition. And there have been such recompositions before. The interwar years saw a massive social and spatial restructuring of employment. It was then that the basic industries plunged into decline; and the new sectors which grew up were completely different. They were at the other end of the country — in the Midlands and South East. They demanded different skills, implied a different social structure. And the unions which organised in them (TGWU, NUGMW) were different, too. This is *not* to

imply that each and every change should be accepted, nor, certainly, that the present form of spatial recomposition is politically inevitable. It is merely to point out that what we have now was once itself new and untried; the organisational frameworks which are now so familiar themselves had once to be built.

Moreover, much of what is now thought of as new has not been absent before; it has simply been ignored. The past which it is commonly thought we are leaving has been inaccurately mythologised. Take this 'new' entry of women into manual jobs — women now represent about 30% of all manual workers, which is about the same as in 1911! If any thing it has been the intervening years which have been the exception. Again, manufacturing employment has *never* been numerically dominant in the economy. And some of the strongest points of the labour movement have always been outside manufacturing — coal mining is the most obvious example.

### The 'new geography' may look pretty unprepossessing at first sight, but there are possibilities

So there is a need to readjust our stylised image of the past. And, anyway, we should not just be seeking the restoration of the old and well-remembered. After all, it wasn't a spectacular success. We cannot re-create the old labour movement of the coalfields, for instance, and it, too, had its share of disadvantages and its own vulnerabilities.

But there *have* been major changes. And they do require a response. Is the outlook, then, as grim as most assessments would have it? Is no response possible?

One counter to the bleakest scenarios of the future is that they are, curiously, very geographically determinist. It is argued, for instance, that the great cities, with their variety of enterprises and industries, and with their anonymity, provided ideal places for union organisation, and that that is now gone. In one sense it is true. But that union organisation had to be constructed, and the form which it took corresponded to, took advantage of, the setting. That was how that particular 'geography', the urban form, was used to advantage. But by no means all the old centres of trade union strength had those characteristics. Some of the strongest bases were in small, single-industry settlements — colliery villages for example.

There are now different situations, demanding different strategies and forms of organisation. The 'new geography' may look

pretty unprepossessing at first sight, but there are possibilities. The problems of organising in multi-regional companies are clear, but such companies do open up new potential contact between areas. It is a difficult potential to grasp, but then it wasn't so simple to build unity on the coalfields either. The growth in numbers, unionisation and militancy of public sector workers offers opportunities at local level for linking employment with community issues, and possibilities at national level for coordinated action entailing a presence in every locality, which no other industry provides.

The problem is that the movement always seems to be on the receiving end of such processes: never to hold the initiative. The impetus for industrial restructuring has come in an immediate sense from capital. And much of it is a response to, and an attempt to break, established elements of labour movement organisation. Certainly this has been true spatially. The decline of the cities has had as one element a relative shift away from better organised workers. At the other end of the process the decentralisation of production has certainly seen managements seeking out potentially vulnerable and difficult-to-organise workforces. But the fact that that was part of the rationale does not guarantee success. At each end of the process there is now a fight back. The cities are far from dead politically, however much they might be losing jobs. The fact of decline, together with their changing social structure, has been a basis for some of them to become the seedbeds of a new kind of politics, based around new coalitions, and attempting a restructuring more on labour's terms. And it is not just the big cities. The examples of Plessey-Bathgate, of Lee Jeans and Lovable, give notice that capital might just have been mistaken in its assumption that the women workers of 'the regions' would not get organised.

So the situation is *not* all gloom and doom. There are already attempts to respond, to take back some of the initiative. But for that to be possible in a wider way does demand that we recognise the extent and the depth of the structural changes which are going on. It is certainly not that old bases, either socially or geographically, should be abandoned. But it is urgent to recognise both that they themselves are changing and that new bases must be constructed — both amongst the expanding elements of the workforce and in new parts of the country. D

(1) Thanks to Nick Miles for help in getting together the data for these figures.

(2) Doreen Massey and Richard Meegan, 1979, The geography of industrial reorganisation. *Progress in Planning* 10, 3, Pergamon Oxford.