

Industrial Conflict and Economic Change: The Regional Context of the Industrial Revolution

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In his *Religion and Society in a Cotswold Vale: Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, 1780–1865* (University of California Press, 1990) [henceforth *R&S*], Albion Urdank has attempted to write a 'histoire totale' on the lines of the model of Ladurie and Goubert, if for a rather smaller territory. His themes are essentially those of the interplay between industry, society and Non Conformity in an extensive textile-making parish in the heart of the Gloucestershire woollen industry. And from his vantage point in Nailsworth, Urdank confidently extrapolates a thesis which is, he believes, applicable for the rest of the West of England woollen industry and indeed for the British experience of the social effects of industrialisation. It is with interest therefore that I read his critique of my own *Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776–1809* (Cambridge, 1991) [henceforth *BTL*] which appears in this journal [Vol. 13, pp. 155–60] since my theme, like Urdank's, is to interpret and to explain the significance and process of social change in the Industrial Revolution.

Both *BTL* and *R&S* have as their core a concept of community. As such, both fit into the on-going debate about the nature and significance of the role of 'community' as a tool of historical analysis.¹ Their approaches are, however, very different. Urdank's approach is broadly an aggregative one. He has consulted an extensive range of demographic, economic and political sources in his reconstruction of Nailsworth, unearthing in the process some very interesting material concerning the world of local Dissent in the early nineteenth century. The extensive tables, some seventy odd in all, which fill his book indicate an assiduous accumulator of data (if also a belief that, if it cannot be counted it was not important). But Urdank is also keen to test this data against a range of theoretical models since he believes that this alone will allow meaningful interpretation. The result is a self-admittedly very dense exposition since 'a great deal of highly localised information has been worked in to a layered mosaic, which grows increasingly complex with the passage of each chapter'. The reader is exhorted to absorb this knowledge slowly: 'patient

readers will [thereby] gain a distinctive aesthetic reward by doing so, but this study also promises them a fully integrated picture of local life emerging slowly and steadily.' The picture of the community of Nailsworth constructed in this way underpins Urdank's approach to the issue of the development of popular value systems. 'Quantifiable variables have made it possible to draw meaningful inferences about popular *mentalité* and behaviour, particularly in the absence of written records'. The motif he thereby discerns is one of a very slowly changing society dominated by 'paternalists' in which textile workers were imbued with a 'petty bourgeois psychology' which displayed little evidence of an emergent working class culture.²

BTL approaches the issue of community from an altogether different direction and tradition, namely from the structuring of economic, social and political relations and from the value systems these engendered. Community is seen not as a static entity, a collection of individuals and properties, but as an organic and developing set of complex relationships based upon power and authority systems which were both reciprocal and dynamic. The challenge presented by the development of a mechanised woollen industry to such 'community politics'³ lies at the heart of *BTL*'s thesis. While Urdank seeks to explain *mentalités* from aggregative data and theoretical testing, *BTL* seeks to interpret them by examining the community bases of popular protest and action and by addressing the differing responses to the process and to the experience of change. These social and political balances, the sources of stress and cooperation which in the West of England made up a community dense in its inter-action and rich in a tradition of protest and concession are, in Urdank's account, lost or replaced with a simple paternalist/deference matrix.

These radically different approaches to and interpretations of the evidence of community relationships and economic and social change come through clearly in Urdank's review of *BTL* which reiterates the views which he developed at length in *R&S*. This paper addresses this debate with particular reference to two issues, namely the question of accounting for the decline of the woollen industry in the West of England and the problems of reconstructing the character of social and class development.

Urdank is generous in his praise of the literary style of *BTL* but methodologically it clearly fails the Urdank test, being largely 'narrative' account. It would be unkind to point out that the shaky 'theoretical' bases of Urdank's own work have been severely savaged by several reviewers for his 'uncritical' aggregative appeals to contradictory 'authorities'⁴ and perhaps unwise to note that 'narrative history' is enjoying a new theoretical 'respectability' in some quarters.⁵ Despite the 'compelling descriptive quality of the narrative', in engaging with the theories of proto-industrial-

isation, industrial development, popular protest and social stratification, *BTL* is found wanting.

On the issue of proto industrialisation, Urdank's criticism reveals a misunderstanding of the theory itself which posits a *linear* development from *kaufsystem* [artisanal workshop production] to *verlagsystem* [putting out] to factory system as a reflection of capital accumulation and growing capitalist control.⁶ My case is that this linear growth model fitted neither the reality of the experience of the West of England woollen industry [*verlagsystem*] nor that of the West Riding of Yorkshire [*kaufsystem*] since in *both* regions the structures of production in place in the 18th century developed social systems and social values which proved very tenacious and resistant to change. Thus the development of the factory system in the West of England was delayed by worker hostility and by clothier reluctance to force through innovatory technology and organisation while in the West Riding the Domestic System and the cloth halls vigorously resisted the factory system until the 1830s. Urdank sees the Yorkshire development [from *kaufsystem* to factory] as *conforming* to the proto-industrialisation thesis since it 'adopted elements of the putting out system along the way'. Some theoretical rigour!

Setting the issue of the Yorkshire industry to one side, what really upsets Urdank is my claim that the community-based and trade union-based protests of woollen workers in the West of England played a significant part in delaying the take-up of new technology and of the factory system and may have thereby been instrumental in the industry's failure. Nor does he like my argument that the cultural values of stability, order and hostility to sweeping industrial restructuring were held not just by workers but by many capitalists as well. He dismisses my claim that many clothier families abandoned the trade rather than take up the challenge of the new [and socially unwelcome] role of factory master, since in Gloucestershire some did cross this threshold. Further research is needed here before we can quantify either view, though the evidence for the general failure of the old out-putting clothier class to make the transition to factory masters, a role whose nature and social status many clearly did not relish, seems incontrovertible for most of the West of England region.⁷

More interesting is his claim that there is no evidence that 'resistance impeded significantly the adoption of machinery'. Why then, must we ask, was the jenny in extensive use in Yorkshire from the 1770s and not in the West of England until the 1790s? Why did scribbling engines facilitate the rapid acceleration of production in Yorkshire in the 1780s when riots were still holding up their introduction into both Wiltshire and Gloucestershire in the 1790s? Why did the flying shuttle loom enable weavers in Yorkshire to speed up productivity from the 1770s, while in Gloucestershire it was occasioning major tensions in 1793, and in

Somerset it provoked riots on its introduction as late as 1822? And why were gig mills and shearing frames to be found multiplying extensively in Yorkshire in the aftermath of Parliament's decision to repeal the old regulatory statutes in 1809 whilst even in Gloucestershire, where the shearmen were particularly feeble in protecting their interests, did they appear only slowly until the later 1810s? Why were rotary cutters, which incidentally had been invented by a Gloucestershire clothier, taken up much more slowly in that county in the 1820s than in Yorkshire? And why were power looms so much more rapidly adopted in the West Riding than in the West of England?

Urdank refers us to his own work to explain where I have gone wrong.⁸ The Industrial Revolution in the West of England was not a failure. It was glorious success. 'The West of England trade collapsed, to be sure, but it did so following its successful transition to the factory system after 1825 and not before.' The operation was successful but the patient died. Of course the West had factories. It also had loomshops. And it had both in numbers well before 1825. But even a rudimentary glance at growth rates or factory building reveals a development well behind even the slowest Yorkshire districts. In part at least the lack of dynamic of the clothiers was a contributory factor. 'My father made as much profit on one cloth as I do on Twenty', stated J.F. Lewis of Ebley in 1833. 'The sweeping reductions that have been made on profits incline us not to overwork ourselves.'⁹ So much for the entrepreneurial ethic! The notion that 1826 marked the turning point for the industry, a view Urdank dismisses out of hand, is not mine alone. Julia Mann, whose scholarship and knowledge of the industry dwarfs us all, said exactly this. And her explanation is the combination of market, product, entrepreneurial and labour failure.¹⁰ Urdank will have none of this. The ultimate and, he believes, much later collapse of the industry 'had strictly economic causes rooted in technical problems of capital formation.' Technical stuff, but what does it mean? Urdank explains in *R&S*. The real cause of failure was 'excess capacity . . . rather than the alleged entrepreneurial failure of [the] clothiers'. 'Because of intensified competition and the vulnerability of smaller firms to trade depression, large capital intensive firms came to predominate earlier at Gloucester' than in Yorkshire. Small firms were not as efficient. Larger firms gleaned greater shares 'because of greater capitalization'. And then, when they collapsed, they took the whole lot down with them as the industry 'ultimately fell victim to market forces'.¹¹ This is hardly convincing. One may ask why the cotton industry of Lancashire did not collapse in the same way since there the growth of large capital-intensive firms well outpaced Gloucestershire, and in cotton too smaller firms frequently failed to compete? Why did the larger firms of the West not enjoy large economies of scale and why could they not

adapt to changing markets as their rivals in Yorkshire did? Perhaps J.F. Lewis was more typical than Urdank supposes? Perhaps too the hostility and inertia of the labour force likewise might have included Lewis' *ennui* or reluctance to press for change? Certainly this is a factor which delayed the take up of new technology in the years before 1809.¹² This takes us on to the second area, that of community and labour protest.

The study of popular protest must, perforce, begin with an examination of those protests themselves and the context, social, economic and political, in which they occur. The thesis of *BTL* is, as Urdank notes, to suggest that the response to the introduction of machinery in the woollen industry in the years from 1776 to 1809 was controlled and channelled within the context of a community rich in its tradition of collective self-defence. These responses were clearly informed by the mass support for the protestors, not only from within the ranks of the labouring classes, but also from the petty capitalists and some of the greater capitalists in the industry, and from the general body of rate payers. This was because the onset of machinery was recognised by all as marking a substantive and substantial shift in the structure of economic power within the industry.

Urdank sees such defensive actions as indicative not of a community or even of a trade but of 'a committed few, (what one might call anachronistically "ultra leftish").' The actions of the crowd at Shepton Mallet in 1776 or the attacks on master dressers' property in Wiltshire in 1802, are to Urdank nothing more or less than 'terrorism'. He indeed takes me to task for failing to distinguish between types of violence, 'confounding terrorism with simple riot, or intimidation of blacklegs'. I am frankly puzzled by this, not being able to accurately specify what a 'simple riot' would consist of. Urdank's comment is indicative of that functionalist mentality which continues to befuddle the ideologically-mounted successors of Talcot Parsons *et al* who see violence of any nature as dysfunctional and essentially self-defeating.¹³ Yet industrial violence was a most effective bargaining technique. The shearmen of Wiltshire well calculated the consequences of a burned hay rick as a negotiating ploy in their attempt to stem the flow of finishing machinery into West Wiltshire in 1802. The weavers of Gloucestershire were quick to respond to the threat to their trade posed by the advent of loom shops, with intimidatory mass meetings and some discreet threats in 1793, while the scribblers likewise were prepared to use incremental violence in a bid to prevent the adoption of scribbling engines. In all these cases, the use of violence was both controlled and, if only for a time, successful. Urdank however cannot believe that ordinary working people could or did organise themselves effectively, assess the efficiency of different tactics and carry them out with general community consent and support, unless they had the leadership of their social superiors.

We can see Urdank's underlying assumptions most clearly when we read his own work, on what he sees as the pivotal crisis of the Gloucestershire industry, the weavers' strike of 1825, originally published in the *Journal of British Studies*, but reproduced and extended in his *R&S*.¹⁴

The Gloucestershire weavers' strike of 1825 took place in the context of the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824, and in a climate of steadily improving trade. In October 1824 the weavers called a county-wide meeting and agreed to petition the clothiers to agree to a new uniform list of weaving rates, very like the one they had last attained in 1756, which would generally raise earnings. Some clothiers responded favourably but the majority ignored their weavers' request. For four months the weavers gathered their strength and in February 1825 delegates were sent to every clothier seeking general compliance with the October rates. When this too met with rebuff and some of those who had raised rates before now indicated they would reduce, the weavers' leaders called a strike. 'On April 28th the weavers stopped working and in about forty eight hours nearly all the shuttles were laid in a silent grave and a quieter stand for wages I never beheld before or since.'¹⁵ Within a matter of days the whole county had stopped work. Some clothiers in the southern manufacturing district led by Sheppard, Vizard and Adey sought a compromise increase of some two-thirds of the proposed new rates. After a time this was accepted by the majority of the southern district clothiers, and their weavers returned to their looms, but only about one third of those in the Stroudwater area would agree. The strike there continued and some minor conflicts ensued when a clothier named Wyatt sought to put out new work. Blacklegs were treated to the traditional community sanction of being paraded around their neighbourhoods astride a pole and then ducked in their employer's mill pond. After some six weeks the clothiers in the northern district gave in and the strike ended on 7 June in euphoric success for the weavers. However, when trade down-turned sharply in November, several clothiers took the opportunity to unilaterally cut wages or to introduce truck. Angry weavers in several localities were involved in attempts to prevent these reductions by assaulting backsliding weavers and destroying the work of obnoxious clothiers. It was this destruction of property which gave the authorities the pretext to initiate prosecutions of the weavers' union leaders in December and January 1826.¹⁶

Urdank interprets this strike as being the work of a class of small scale employers, the master weavers, aided and abetted by paternalist manufacturers and magistrates. He sees the supposed deterioration of the strike from orderliness to violence as indicative of both the growing ascendancy of militants and as characteristic of 'pre-industrial risings'. And he

believes that the strike also conclusively shows that the textile workers of Gloucestershire remained throughout imbued with the petty bourgeois values of the past, showing no evidence of a modern class consciousness.¹⁷ Let us examine his case.

Critical to Urdank's exposition is his belief in the continued existence of a class of master craftsmen, the master weavers, as a petit bourgeois producer group in the Gloucestershire woollen industry, somewhat akin to the master clothiers of Yorkshire. Urdank has extensively examined the evidence for property ownership and social structure in Nailsworth, albeit from a mostly mid-nineteenth century perspective. Nevertheless, the case he makes for a propertied class of master producers is assumed rather than proven. Urdank points to the evidence of weavers owning cottages, leaving wills which detail workshops and tools and assarting land from the numerous commons around Nailsworth. So they did. But Urdank, curiously for an historian who makes his claim as an uncoverer of community, fails to understand the context. Certainly the weavers frequently referred to themselves as 'master weavers'. Some did indeed employ journeymen to work with them in their little shops on the looms they owned. However, the term master weaver carried a *social* rather than an *economic* meaning for the majority. It denoted that the weaver had been apprenticed or 'brought up in the trade' in the customarily approved manner, that he now owned his own loom and that he now was an independent agent, taking work from whomsoever he chose. The majority of weavers in the industry from at least the 1790s worked in this way in their own cottages. Some prospered and bought their homes, some bought land, some bought more cottages to let to other weavers, but this did not make them industrial capitalists. Certainly weavers' cottages were normally described as having a 'workshop' but this did not mean some sort of proto factory. It was where weaving was performed. And most weavers who were able to afford it bought not one but two, three or four looms. This was not to enable them to employ ever larger numbers of journeymen, but to employ their own family, and to ensure that they could take work from different clothiers, and for different markets at the same time. This age-old practice infuriated the clothiers who wanted to be able to dictate the pace of outworking production more closely. For the same reason the weavers preferred to have more looms. It gave them security of sorts in the face of the vicissitudes of a notoriously fluctuating trade. And it gave them the notion of independence that came from having some say in the choice of employer. Certainly the grip of the clothiers had tightened by the 1820s when Urdank is particularly concerned with them. But the legacy of the past, the customs of the trade, the traditions of community established and developed in the 18th century continued to inform the weavers' value systems into the 1840s. So when Urdank

comes across the phrase 'master weavers' and assumes that they were an employer class, he is demonstrating his lack of awareness of the context of the community which he is studying.

Urdank sees the strike as having three phases. The first from 29 April¹⁸ to late May 1825, saw the commencement of action by a trade union established in late 1824 by the leading master weavers. In what Urdank sees as a typically deferential fashion, they had already sought the aid of 'paternalist' clothiers like Sheppard and, when reluctantly they decided upon strike action, they looked to him for support. His proposed compromise to end the strike reflected not just a belief in a uniform rating scale, but also a recognition that the new rates would save him money.

The second phase of the strike in early June saw the 'sudden' outbreak of 'riotous' violence with weavers attacking an under-price clothier who refused to accept the newly proposed rates. The magistrates were not only 'curiously' reluctant to intervene in this. At least one of their number was, Urdank believes, in fact coordinating and leading the rioters in actions which reflected the 'pre-industrial risings' of the sixteenth century.

Finally, in the third and final phase in November, more violent riots broke out since 'By this time those weavers who had remained on strike had become more militant and acted with greater independence, even if they represented only a minority'. There were 'planned violent attacks on property' and various 'desperate and gratuitous acts' as the strike collapsed in defeat.¹⁹ In the face of impending defeat, the weavers began to make plans for wider and more militant organisation which envisaged setting up 'employers' of their own in rivalry to the gentlemen clothiers.

All this reveals a quite woeful grasp on the context both of the industry and of the community which is Urdank's especial subject. The weavers' union established in 1824 was not the creation of a minority of employing petty capitalists but of the broad mass of the weavers of the county. Nor was it new. It was constituted on precisely the same lines as previous unions, including the union which in 1756 had conducted the petitions to the Quarter Sessions and to Parliament, and organised the extensive strike to enforce uniform wage rates throughout the county;²⁰ the weavers' union which had protested about wages rates in 1793, and in 1802 was responsible for the petitioning over the old legislation, which prevented clothiers establishing loom shops;²¹ and the union which in 1821 'made a stand' and successfully coerced their employers to restore wage reductions.²² Precisely the same form, namely delegates representing the parishes, a central executive of sorts and a series of district meetings to put the union's policy to the membership, can be seen at all these moments. Moreover, the same policy comes through time and again, to regulate and stabilise prices, to oppose the introduction of loomshops and to resist the unfair abuses of truck, illegal workers, illegal warping bars,

false weights, and all the paraphernalia with which the clothiers from time immemorial sought to cheat their weavers. These were issues which touched *all* the weavers, not just those relative few who employed non-familial journeymen. The leading men were all weavers of some substance like Timothy Exell or James Okey. But while they referred to themselves as master weavers, this was to signify to their employers that they were no mere 'hands'. The old values of status and independence were not confined to a few petty capitalists. They were the values of a whole community. The clothiers were being again reminded that the men they dealt with were deserving of some respect.

Urdank's notion that the union was an affair run by and dictated by a class of small-scale employers simply makes no sense. How, one must ask, in such a case could they have persuaded their men willingly to turn out on strike for an issue which, in Urdank's view, did not really touch the 'journeymen'?²³ Further, not only does Urdank see the union as being run by and for the master weavers, he also sees them as particularly stupid. Their plan to equalise wage rates was, he believes, in fact defective and confused since they did not apparently realise that the rates they requested would allow some clothiers to cut rates. Nor did they see that to implement a uniform price list would, because of the enormous range and variety of cloths produced in the county, only create numerous anomalies which would either prove unworkable or destroy many parts of the trade. These supposed petty capitalists are thus revealed as failing to understand the real world. Their approach to the issue, being 'less concerned about winning a serious pay rise than about standardizing weaving rates', indicated 'how incomplete their appreciation of the rules of the marketplace remained', and the fact that they were 'still more custom minded than market oriented' in clinging to a 'guildlike' value system.²⁴

Again it is Urdank, not his subjects, who shows the lack of appreciation of the real problems being faced. The Gloucestershire weavers had been down this road many times before. Their collective folk memory, revealed to us by Timothy Exell whose *History* shows not just the oral tradition but a proper historian of the community at work,²⁵ meant that they were very well aware of the difficulties. The disputes of 1755-6 had been precisely about this issue, the clothiers' opposition then to regulated prices made on precisely the same grounds of non-applicability and a host of complexities. But the weavers recognised that while a uniform series of rate might cut both ways, it would place a solid floor under their conditions and expose any clothier who sought to undermine the agreement, not merely to weaver, but also to clothier hostility. They may have sought equalisation of rates but the demands made and the agreement reached in June marked equalisation up, not down. Since Parliament was no longer willing after 1809 to establish a legal framework for such

agreements as it had done for a brief period in 1756–7, such community sanction was the best bet left. Urdank fails to see why clothiers would wish to play a game of this sort other than because, like Sheppard, they saw an opportunity to reduce their wage bill. Yet it was not just the ‘master weavers’ who saw advantages in wage-rate stability. Some clothiers, as in the past, also recognised that a uniform price would create a level playing field for their marketing activities too.

Likewise Urdank’s case that the ‘master weavers’ leading the union displayed the usual ‘deferential’ habits of the petty capitalist, does not stand up to any careful appraisal. Certainly the petition of 1824 is phrased in a polite and courteous fashion. But it would have been unduly foolish not to do so when the union’s leaders recognised that they could find some potential allies in the ranks of the clothiers.²⁶ This process of ‘seeking allies among the manufacturers’ is taken by Urdank to indicate what he calls ‘paternalist values’. This ‘grew out of their deferential habits’.²⁷ Urdank might have noted, however, that when the agreement was not forthcoming, these supposedly deferential ‘master weavers’ were willing to enforce a complete stoppage of work across the county. The strike which commenced on 28 April was in fact an impressive example of real industrial power directed towards the clothiers as a whole, sympathetic or not.

Urdank cannot envisage weavers displaying such militancy without the clear consent, collusion and active support of powerful patrons. Yet his account of their reasons for giving this support is by no means clear. Sheppard is described as a paternalist and his compromise proposal to end the strike in May is seen as indicative of his support for the weavers’ union. Yet we are also told that the new rates would save him money. Likewise Urdank takes delight in referring to the claim of William Playne, a prominent clothier, to the effect that clothiers were often behind strikes,²⁸ as further evidence that the weavers could not really have had the wherewithal to orchestrate so extensive and so orderly a strike. Certainly rivalry and competition between clothiers was sometimes fierce, but Urdank should ask what these so-called paternalist capitalists supposedly thought they were playing at, in enabling their labour force to develop powerful and effective organisations of industrial conflict? Urdank in fact fails to tell us that one of the first clothiers to cut wage rates in the autumn of 1825 was Sheppard himself. The motives of the clothiers and their local readings of power balances were much more complex and subtle than Urdank’s simplistic ‘paternalist’ model allows. While, for example, he sees men like Sheppard as holding ‘gentry status’, and hence by inference intimately connected to the magistracy and to political power, this was not necessarily the way they viewed themselves. Sheppard was indeed a clothier of influence who, as many

Gloucestershire clothiers before him, was looking to move his family wealth entirely into land. But his relationship to the bench was by no means as cosy or influential as Urdank supposes. He certainly was outraged by the lack of magisterial support to protect his property in the disturbances in November. And had Urdank bothered to investigate the strike which the same weavers' organisation orchestrated in 1828, he would have seen that Sheppard was in the van in trying to force wage cuts on the weavers.²⁹

Urdank makes much of the supposed violence of the 'second phase' of the 1825 strike, when the early 'moderate, peaceful and deferentially conducted' strike gave way to 'riot'. Certainly the weavers on strike were angry at the attempt of the Wyatts of Vatch Mill to break the strike, but while they were 'tumultuous' in their tone, their behaviour remained remarkably orderly in the circumstances. The work taken out as under-priced was returned, not destroyed, and it is interesting to note that the first cases against those arrested outside Wyatt's mill were dismissed, 'as the aggression was on the part of the master rather than of the men'.³⁰ The victims of the weavers' wrath were their fellow weavers, not the clothiers. The duckings were conducted with ceremony and clearly had wide community support. Nor were the weavers without mercy. One of the blacklegs was a man of eighty, 'the weavers took him to the mill pond' but before ducking him, they 'expressed their utmost concern for the unavoidable necessity they were under of visiting him with their vengeance', and first altruistically supplied him with half a pint of gin. 'They ducked him but without violence, and immediately after made him change his clothes.' While some magistrates and many clothiers bleated that they needed troops 'to assist the civil power in maintaining peace and protecting our properties, both of which are now imminently endangered', they faced *charivari* rather than insurrection.³¹

Urdank sees the head of the magistracy behind these disturbances. 'The simultaneous eruption of violence at Stroud and Frogmarsh, followed almost immediately by riots at Chalford, Minchinhampton, and Woodchester, suggest an element of coordination.' While evidence for clothier responsibility 'is difficult to locate' (though suspected), Urdank gleefully alights upon the case of Richard Aldridge, a Chalford magistrate, who was subsequently tried for assisting the weavers who ducked blacklegs in Bisley. At his trial at which he was *acquitted*, Aldridge was accused of having given advice and support to the ducking parties, on one day actually riding around the parish at the head of a crowd which was enforcing the strike. Urdank sees this as evidence that the dispute in 1825 was nothing other than a 'pre-industrial rising', which 'followed the deferential pattern' of the Lincolnshire rebellion of 1536 since it was the leadership of the gentry which proved the organisation and direction of

the mob.³² This is an extraordinary statement. The world of sixteenth-century Lincolnshire was utterly different from that pertaining in early nineteenth-century Gloucestershire, as any historian with the remotest interest in the discipline of historical context would have acknowledged. The issues which occasioned both disturbances – religion and power in the Tudor Reformation as against wage rates in the Industrial Revolution – allow of no meaningful comparison. To assert that both were in the same ‘historiographic lineage’ is ludicrous.

The role of the bench in labour and consumer disputes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is both interesting and generating much debate. The bench in Gloucestershire had a long tradition of sympathetic involvement in both food riots and industrial disputes. This in turn had produced a pattern in which labour tended to look towards the bench for some support when faced with threats to their trades.³³ This did not mean however that the bench automatically sided with the woollen workers or that magistrates tolerated violence, much less that they would wish to instigate conflict. Their distrust of the manufacturers’ motives, fears of rising poor rates and social unrest, did not mean that the judiciary condoned riot. Their actions and their position was much more complex than Urdank recognises. For example, he notes that the bench ‘remained inexplicably silent’ during the riots in early June, intimating that there was some sinister motive behind this. One obvious reason for their inaction was that many were clearly frightened, as was the Revd. J. Williams when some two thousand weavers surrounded the court hearing the case against the Vatch Mill rioters. None of the magistrates would address the crowd to inform them of what was happening and so he did, urging them to disperse and promising that he would appeal on behalf of the one man remanded. The crowd gave three cheers and departed.³⁴ Many magistrates were clearly angered by the weavers’ displays of strength and anxiously demanded troops.³⁵ But, as in the past, some showed their sympathy. One such was Aldridge. Although Urdank wants to show us Aldridge as a principal in the disturbances, Urdank’s interpretation is not entirely clear, with Aldridge perceived as both the deliberate instigator of, and the helpless bystander to weaver violence. We are left with the impression of the man who began by allowing the mob too much licence and ended up bitterly regretting it.³⁶ Aldridge’s role in the minor disturbances in Bisley in June marks an interesting case in the study of the actions of the bench in the face of popular protest. Had Urdank much knowledge of Gloucestershire in the eighteenth century, he could note the parallels between Aldridge’s actions in 1825, and those of Richard Bedmead of Cowley who took a similarly ‘active’ part in the food riots of 1766, while Aldridge’s approach to intervention in labour disputes echoes that of the unnamed magistrates who advised the weavers on how to conduct their

legal case over the rating of wages during the strike of 1756.³⁷ But we must emphasise that in none of these instances could the magistrates in question be legitimately viewed as having *initiated* the disturbances, or as having provided leadership to the protestors. In all these cases the bench or elements of the bench were reacting to an already mobilised and confident community of woollen workers, who *demand*ed action to uphold their rights or sought arbitration on the principle of equity and custom. It was the recognised power of the weavers to disrupt the local economy, as well as a residual belief in an interventionist paternal model, which informed the bench's actions in 1825. The weavers appreciated such help if it were forthcoming in their struggle with the clothiers, but they were in no way dependent upon it as their coordinated county-wide strike showed.

It is in his analysis of the so-called third phase of the 1825 strike that Urdank's case comes completely to grief. In part this stems from a failure to note the evidence he has before him, namely that the strike ended in June! The anger of November was not that of men who had been striking since April. It was entirely the reaction to seeing the fruits of their hard won strike being undermined. In November, Urdank believes, a new sort of violence, planned attacks on clothiers' property of a 'quasi-military aspect', marked a shift to new levels of militancy, independent of gentry leadership. And yet, even so, he argues that this new autonomy did not indicate a changed social consciousness. While some might discern the burgeoning of a working class, Urdank sees only the reassertion of petty bourgeois values.

The growing militancy of the union reflects, he believes, a shift from its original '*ad. hoc.* association with limited goals', into a broad mass organisation.³⁸ Quite how this was achieved is by no means clear. Did the 'master weavers' compel their journeymen into joining and then see these proletarians wrest control of their deferential organisation away from them, turning it into a militant crusade involving violent action? Apparently they did since Urdank tells us that the union was 'transformed into a militant movement'. When this occurred he does not say. But note: 'it was a militant movement of the minority'!!³⁹ The masses took over but only the ultra leftists held the power. [Where did I come across that before? Ah yes, just as in the Wiltshire Outrages.] Urdank knows that the militants took over because J.P. Purnell, a local magistrate obsessed by the dangers of labour organisation and political subversion, said so⁴⁰ and Urdank believes him. How far is such a view sustainable?

In brief, the disturbances which broke out in November followed the downturn of trade and the attempts by some clothiers, including Sheppard, to cut wages. The weavers' union leaders tried hard to maintain control and order but local anger tended to boil over into not just

community sanctions against blacklegs, but also the destruction of cloths and part-woven work. When a crowd outside the Wotton mill of Edward Neale were fired upon, injuring one woman and twelve men, they broke all the mill windows and burned his cloths. This provided the authorities with the opportunity to arrest many of the union's leading lights. Troops were drafted back into the district and peace of sorts was restored. However, throughout the winter of 1826 violence against blacklegs continued with some thirty houses having their windows broken, while in February Vatch Mill was burned down. Significantly, only a relatively few clothiers chose to cut wage rates at this time. Nothing about these disturbances indicates either a change of lead or direction of the weavers' union. Exell, the key figure in 1824, was clearly the leader still in November as the determination of the authorities to find some pretext to imprison him indicated.⁴¹ He was no more an ultra leftist then than he was in 1824 or in 1838. His attitudes and statements at all times reveal a man imbued with a moral fervour, and a deep sense of outrage at the rapacious destruction of the weavers' rights and livelihoods by the cost-cutting clothiers. The actions of the union were typical of any in such a context, seeking to hold the line gained in good times against the assault of employers during depression. Urdank's notion of some violent shift to the left has no foundation whatsoever.

Urdank however wishes to have his cake and eat it. While he sees the 'strike' veering towards militancy, he still wishes to deny that this may have marked any 'modernisation' of protest. The militants who led the union were not, he tells us, 'progressive'. They still displayed a 'traditional' petit bourgeois mentality.⁴² The best example of his thinking on this point can be seen in the analysis he offers of the aims which he believes the union developed in this 'final' phase of the dispute. Purnell noted that the union's Rules directed that

work should not be taken out under price – no one to work where there are more than three looms – no one to keep more than three looms – that no one shall weave without having served a seven year apprenticeship – that every weaver shall belong to the union – that only union journeymen shall be employed.

Urdank tells us that while these seem to point towards a modern trade union, they in fact 'reveal a profoundly traditionalist petit bourgeois mentality'. Now, the first four points listed above could be taken from any previous weavers' union declaration in the county. And the last two points merely updated the fact that, once the Statute of Artificers was no more, the union would have to police legal workmen. But the key point which Urdank sees as conclusive for his argument, was 'The Rules pro-

pose to make a limited number of weavers clothiers', made possible by the accumulation of a capital sum of £100 lent to a weaver on security. Purnell saw this as 'manifestly absurd', 'framed by the leaders only as a cover' for their revolutionary designs. Urdank, however, believes that this 'most of all highlighted the middle-class ambitions of the master weavers'. Only they, he says, could possibly have qualified for such a loan. The scheme was thus transparently biased against the poorer members whose contribution would go towards establishing the master weavers as yet larger capitalists.⁴³

It is clear that Urdank has never come across the ideas of the socialists whose propaganda was reaching even such backwaters as Nailsworth by the mid 1820s. They would certainly not have seen this scheme as a means to create worker masters but rather as a means of collective security against an increasingly rapacious capitalism. Had Urdank bothered to look at the union of 1828-9 and its counterparts in Wiltshire and elsewhere, he would find more such echoes.⁴⁴ But this is by the by. Remember that Urdank has explained the increased militancy and violence of the union in November as indicative of the rise in mass participation and of a newly autonomous militant leadership. Urdank has not overlooked this little difficulty but his escape is contrived in the extreme. Recognising his dilemma, he tells us that the militant leadership who duped the journeymen and apprentices, was in fact *all the time*, the master weavers pursuing their own narrow interests as an elite.

The master weavers may have been militant in pursuing their own interests as an elite but such efforts hardly made them fully fledged proletarians or even progressive. Although E.P. Thompson was right to emphasise the nostalgic and defensive qualities of their struggle in the Industrial revolution, he clearly exaggerated their opposition to capitalism and their commitment to communitarian values.⁴⁵

To be honest, one is stretched to follow all of this. Who, one wonders, does Urdank think he is engaging in this argument? Are social historians now to note a new class of reactionary non-radical militant ultra-leftish petty employers as the principal agency with which to explain the social turmoil of the Industrial Revolution?! Anyone with half an eye on the Gloucestershire weavers' strike can see it as highly typical of weavers' industrial action across the country at this time. Here we encounter the same concern to defend custom, to underpin wage rates with agreed prices, to keep out interlopers who were flooding their trade and to develop appropriate means of self help. Certainly they were in many ways backward looking, a point I continually make in *BTL*.⁴⁶ But they were not anti-capitalist or anti-market. How could they have been, since their whole lives as producers and consumers centred around markets? What

they sought, and what they continued to seek in their adherence to unions and to political movements like Chartism, was a market which was regulated and controlled within customary and moral parameters, a market where the rights of labour and petty capital would be as respected as those of the largest entrepreneurs and industrialists, a market which reflected a society of independent and free men and women, not slaves.

It is ironic that in the lengthened version of his account of the 1825 strike which appears in *R&S*, Urdank should feel the need to emphasise the pivotal nature of the strike's supposed failure, by explaining to us that 'The structure and composition of weavers' strikes altered fundamentally between 1826 and 1834.' He believes that the rise of loom factories [in fact a source of bitter conflict since the 1790s⁴⁷] saw the union first reach out to organise factory weavers and then, following their defeat in 1829, be taken over by them. 'In 1833-4 when unionism finally reappeared, factory operatives served as the organisation's new constituency and granted leadership to a now degraded class of cottage workers.'⁴⁸ Exell and his colleagues who orchestrated the weavers' submission to the Hand Loom Weavers' Commission would have been amused by this! Urdank appears to assume a cataclysmic collapse of the 'master weavers' sometime between 1825 and 1833. If so, it is interesting that he found no evidence of this in his work on demography and social structure for these years. And if it were the case, what would this mean for Urdank's thesis of an emergent middling class consciousness? The answer is of course that Urdank's whole argument about the union of 1825 is irredeemably flawed by his lack of contextual awareness and that continuity, albeit a continuity of gradually accelerating decline, was in fact the characteristic of this process of industrialisation and social change in Gloucestershire.

The purpose of this investigation of Urdank's thesis is not to disparage his attempt at writing a total history. I very firmly believe in the project of community reconstruction. It is only by a careful examination of the community context of social protest and industrial protest that we can begin to make sense of the experience of and the response to change. Urdank has produced some valuable evidence of the changing material structure of an important manufacturing parish which has relevance for other scholars working in other areas. The bones of the Vale of Nailsworth are there in *R&S* for all to pick over. But it is not enough to plonk the bones of a community on the table like the contents of a rag and bone man's sack, and then simply assume how the skeleton fitted together and worked. We have to attempt to make sense of the structuring of work and of the social and economic forces which mediated real power relations between the classes, if we are to understand the ways in which social relations developed, and how industrialisation transformed the country. Likewise, it is untenable, given the current vibrant state of

the historiography of the authorities and the crowd, to assume that only top-down control mechanisms existed and that the only significant players in times of crisis were always the propertied. Misreadings of history such as Urdank's, smack of a wilful imposition of an ideological perspective deliberately hostile to any acceptance of the agency of working people in the development of their own history. Moreover, they seriously distort our understanding of the differing pace of industrial development which characterised the Industrial Revolution in the English regions.

Notes

¹ See in particular C. Calhoun, 'Community: toward a variable conceptualization for comparative research', *Social History*, Vol. 5, 1, (1980), pp. 105–29.

² *Religion and Society*, pp. 5–6, 7.

³ The phrase comes from J. Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810* (Harvard, 1983).

⁴ For example, reviews by C. Brown, *Economic History Review*, XLIV, 3, (1991); R. Vann, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXII, 1, (1991); and J. Cox, *Journal of British Studies*, XXXI, 2, (1992).

⁵ See, for example, D. Carr, 'Narrative and the real world: an argument for continuity', *History and Theory*, 25, (1986); T.C. Patterson, 'Post-structuralism, post-modernism: implications for historians', *Social History*, 14, 1, (1989); L. Stone, 'The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history', *Past and Present*, 85, (1979); L. Stone, 'History and post-modernism', *Past and Present*, 131, (1991); C. Kelly, 'History and post-modernism', *Past and Present*, 133, (1991).

⁶ For the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of proto-industrialisation, see: F.F. Mendels, 'Proto-industrialisation: the first phase of the industrialisation process', *Journal of Economic History*, XXXII, 1, (1972); H. Medick, 'The proto-industrial family economy: the structural function of household and family during the transition from peasant society to industrial capitalism', *Social History*, 3, (1976); P. Kriedte, H. Medick and J. Schlumbohm, *Industrialisation Before Industrialisation* (Cambridge, 1982); M. Berg, P. Hudson and M. Sonenscher, (eds.), *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory* (Cambridge, 1983), particularly ch. 1.

⁷ It is interesting, for example, to compare the list of the Gloucestershire subscribers (78 firms in all and said to embrace the leading firms in the county) to the Association of Clothiers set up in 1802 to agitate for the repeal of the old regulatory statutes, with evidence of which concerns continued to exist in the 1820s. See J. Tann, *Gloucestershire Woollen Mills* (Newton Abbot, 1967), pp. 44–6 and *passim*.

⁸ A.M. Urdank, 'Economic decline in the English Industrial Revolution: the Gloucester wool trade, 1800–1840', *Journal of Economic History*, XLV, 2, (1985), pp. 427–31.

⁹ *British Parliamentary Papers, 1834, Vol. XX, Factory Commissioners Supplementary Report*, ii, B1, 40.

¹⁰ J. de L. Mann, *The Cloth Industry in the West of England from 1640 to 1880* (Oxford 1971), p. 168; 'The year 1826 was the great dividing line of the period.' See also p. 177 re the causes of decline: 'the manufacturers who talked to Miles in 1839 [complaining of hard times] were prominent examples of the practice of taking too much capital out of the industry to support a high level of consumption'.

¹¹ Urdank, *Religion and Society*, p. 206. Chapter 6 details the argument.

¹² 'If we in this part of the Kingdom attempt to introduce [machinery], it must be with the risk of our lives and fortunes'; thus, Matthew Humphreys of Chippenham in 1786. Randall, *Before the Luddites*, p. 104.

¹³ For a discussion of this school see F.K. Donnelly, 'Ideology and early English working class history: E.P. Thompson and his critics', *Social History*, 2, (1976).

¹⁴ A.M. Urdank, 'Custom, conflict and traditional authority in the Gloucester weavers' strike of 1825', *Journal of British Studies*, XXV, (1986), pp. 193–226; *Religion and Society*, Ch. 7 has a new brief introduction, some minor changes and extensions and a further eleven pages examining in cursory fashion 'Strikes and Protests, 1827–1848', three pages of which are devoted to the Anti-Corn Law League.

¹⁵ T. Exell, *A Brief History of the Weavers of the County of Gloucester* (Stroud, 1838), p. 8.

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion and analysis than is offered in *Religion and Society*, see A.J. Randall, 'Labour and the Industrial Revolution in the West of England Woollen Industry', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1979), ch. 8.

¹⁷ *Religion and Society*, pp. 208–46.

¹⁸ The strike actually began on 28 April.

¹⁹ *Religion and Society*, pp. 222–7, 243, 229–30.

²⁰ A.J. Randall, 'The industrial moral economy of the Gloucestershire weavers in the eighteenth century' in J. Rule, ed., *British Trade Unionism 1750–1850: The Formative Years* (Longman 1988), pp. 29–51.

²¹ *Before the Luddites*, pp. 196–7, 202–2.

²² Randall, 'Labour and the Industrial Revolution', pp. 529–31.

²³ *Religion and Society*, pp. 212, 215.

²⁴ *Religion and Society*, pp. 211, 215. Cf. 'our only aim has been to bring the unfeeling part of the manufacturers up to one general standard'; statement on behalf of the weavers' union, *Gloucester Journal*, 30 May 1825.

²⁵ Exell, *A Brief History*.

²⁶ John Smails makes a similar error in supposing that the polite phrasing of the master clothiers' petitions and evidence to the committee investigating the woollen industry in 1806 likewise reflected a deferential mentality. See Randall, 'New languages or old? Labour, capital and discourse in the Industrial Revolution', *Social History*, 15, 2, (1990), pp. 195–216.

²⁷ *Religion and Society*, p. 216.

²⁸ *British Parliamentary Papers, 1840, Vol. 24*, Reports from the Assistant Handloom Weavers' Commissioners (5), p. 451, 448–9. The source was William, not Peter, Playne.

²⁹ Randall, *Labour and the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 558–9.

³⁰ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], H[ome] O[ffice], 40/19, Rev. J. Williams to Peel, 31 August 1825.

³¹ *Gloucester Journal*, 13 June 1825; *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, 14 June 1825; PRO. HO. 40/19, Manufacturers to Burgh and Hawker, 4 June 1825.

³² *Religion and Society*, pp. 222–3, 243 and especially note 45, p. 393.

³³ Randall, *Labour and the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 451–5.

³⁴ PRO. HO. 40/19, Rev. J. Williams to Peel, 31 Aug. 1825.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Burgh and Hawker to Peel, 4 June 1825.

³⁶ *Religion and Society*, pp. 223–7.

³⁷ A.J. Randall, 'The Gloucestershire food riots of 1766', *Midland History*, X, (1985), p. 81; Randall, 'The industrial moral economy', pp. 36–7. We will know more of the role of the bench in industrial protest when the work of the ESRC group investigating *Popular Protest and Community Change in the West of England, 1750–1850* have completed their work. The project team consists of Andrew Charlesworth, Richard Sheldon, David Walsh and myself.

³⁸ *Religion and Society*, p. 229.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ PRO. HO. 40/19, P.B. Purnell to Duke of Beaufort, 31 January 1826. 'The present question about wages is, I consider, a matter of *no* more importance to them than any other question, the agitation of which will give them influence and command over immense bodies of their fellows and which may thus perhaps hold out an indistinct prospect of ultimate advantage from some revolutionary scramble.' Note, however, that Purnell believed that the leaders 'are of the same rank in life as the rest but of superior abilities, indeed of enviable talent for the management of an immense assemblage.'

⁴¹ For a detailed account see Randall, 'Labour and the Industrial Revolution', pp. 555–75.

⁴² To prove this point, Urdank notes that Exell later opposed Chartism, [no explanation is offered but it is evident that Urdank sees espousal of Chartism as indicative of a 'progressive' – as in the case of J.R. Stephens perhaps?]. Excell's opposition to involvement in the Chartist movement reflected a misplaced confidence in the Royal Commission established to investigate the weavers' conditions in 1838 and in the supposed support he hoped for from the newly crowned Victoria. Exell, *A Sketch of the Circumstances which Providentially led to the Repeal of the Corn and Animal Food Laws* (Dursley, 1847), p. 11. It may also be seen as evidence of the deep seated belief in the moral economy by men such as Exell which, as I suggest in *Before the Luddites*, ch. 8, may well have delayed and resisted the take up of newer class-based ideologies in the West of England.

⁴³ PRO. HO. 40/19, P.B. Purnell to Duke of Beaufort, 31 January 1826; *Religion and Society*, p. 229–30.

⁴⁴ For the West of England textile areas see Randall, 'Labour and the Industrial Revolution', pp. 580–4; for Yorkshire and Lancashire see G.D.H. Cole, *Attempts at General Union: A Study in British Trade Union History, 1818–1834* (London, 1953), and R. Kirby and A.E. Musson, *The Voice of the People. John Doherty, 1798–1854, Trade Unionist, Radical and Factory Reformer* (Manchester, 1975).

⁴⁵ *Religion and Society*, p. 231.

⁴⁶ *Before the Luddites*, particularly ch. 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 198–201.

⁴⁸ *Religion and Society*, p. 245.