

## **Rethinking the ‘dominance’ of manufacturers in the northern English town: the middle class in Halifax, c. 1830-1850**

*by Toshihiko Iwama, University of Leeds*

Manufacturers in the Northern English towns in the nineteenth century have been perceived as the dynamic and essential occupational group. This group was distinguished by owning property and managing capital, labour, and cultural and social resources. They were also a representation of the middle class and of leadership in urban public institutions in this century.<sup>1</sup> While there were regional differences in the meaning of ‘manufacturer’ in nineteenth-century British society, this word was always defined by contemporary people.<sup>2</sup> This paper explores the relationship between the manufacturer and the middle class in Halifax in the first half of the nineteenth century.

### **I**

Manufacturers created their identity, ideology and power in local public institutions in the northern towns during the first half of the nineteenth century. Recent works, such as those of Bob Morris and Stana Nenadic,<sup>3</sup> reconsider the ‘dominance’ of the manufacturer in the British middle class in the nineteenth century by analysing the middle class occupations of and the nature of urban public institutions. As a result they confront the myth of the ‘dominance’ of the manufacturers in urban public institutions in the nineteenth century. While public institutions were important for regulating middle class activity and social relationships, were these institutions dominated by the manufacturer? How did manufacturers on these institutions obtain that power? This study re-assesses the dominance of manufacturer in public institutions in a specific local community, Halifax. In order to analyse the nature of public institutions and social relationships and activity in these institutions and to describe the ideology of the middle class, this study uses both the direct

---

<sup>1</sup> Wolff and Seed, eds., *Culture*; Howe, *Cotton*.

<sup>2</sup> Seed, ‘Middling’.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *Class*, esp. chap. 13; Nenadic, ‘Businessmen’, esp. pp.74-83.

evidence of institutional records and local newspapers, and a computer database, created from poll books, commercial directories, local administration records, other associational documents, and so on, totalling more than 50,000 items.

In the eighteenth century, Halifax was one of the centres of the West Riding woollen and worsted industries.<sup>4</sup> The process of industrialisation in Halifax from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century had been relatively gradual with the mechanisation of the worsted and woollen industries less advanced by the mid-nineteenth century than that of other leading textile sectors.<sup>5</sup> Although, by the 1850s, Halifax had become one of the leading worsted and carpet industries centres in the West Riding, other textile industries like cotton and woollens, the machine-tool industry, distribution, and industrial and professional services also became important economic sectors for Halifax.

According to John Smail,<sup>6</sup> the distinct culture of the middle class in Halifax emerged in the public sphere through a local élite composed of manufacturers, merchants and professionals in the second half of the eighteenth century. However the dominance of this local élite in the public sphere had been penetrated by manufacturers in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like Bradford,<sup>7</sup> by the 1850s, Halifax also had giant manufacturers, in families like the Akroyds, worsted factory owners, and the Crossleys, carpet factory owners, who possessed considerable power to regulate the public sphere, though these families were exceptional cases.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Hudson, *Genesis*, chap. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Hudson, *Genesis*; Hargreaves, *Halifax*, chap. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Smail, *Origins*, chap. 5 and 6.

<sup>7</sup> Koditschek, *Class*.

<sup>8</sup> Hargreaves, *Halifax*, chap. 4 and 5.

## II

The late 1820s and the early 1830s were a critical period in establishing the middle class presence in the public institutions of Halifax. First, Halifax township and part of Northowram and Southowram townships became a Parliamentary Borough, electing two MPs, though the main administrative bodies in this parliamentary borough remained the vestry and the town trustee established by the local Improvement Act in 1822. Second, three important banks: the Halifax Joint Stock Banking Company, the Halifax & Huddersfield Union Banking Co., and the Halifax Commercial Banking Co. Ltd. were established. These banks encouraged financial links between the bank and the customers such as the manufacturer, the merchant, and the professional classes. Lastly, some important voluntary associations, the Mechanics' Institutes and the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society were established, although some friendly societies and permanent or temporary benefit societies were already in existence.

The Halifax political scene was influenced by party conflict and by radicalism. The Whig/Liberal group had partnership with radical groups in Halifax before Parliamentary Reform Act 1832, and then allied with the radical group from 1835 election. The alliance between Whig/Liberal and radical groups contributed to their victory of the Halifax Borough elections in 1837 and 1841, although the radical candidate had been defeated in the 1835 Borough election, when serious radical riots attacked Tory supporters in Halifax, with advance electoral consequences. Furthermore, the Anti-Tory strategy of these groups, while fostering relationships between the middle class radicals and the Whig/Liberal group, masked their political differences, and contributed to the overcoming of Social Toryism, which had sought to ally Tory and Radical. Some manufacturers performed crucial roles in this political context. For instance, Jonathan Akroyd, a leading worsted manufacturer in Halifax, was a Methodist New Connection member and had been recognised as one of the principal

Radical Dissenters.<sup>9</sup> He supported the Parliamentary Reform movement in 1832 and the Whig/Liberal candidate in the Halifax Borough elections in the 1830s and 1840s; but he was also a stubborn free-trader, and was militant in his hostility towards the collectivism of labouring people and the Factory Movement.<sup>10</sup>

Manufacturers, merchants and professionals were not able to control public institutions by the unity of their economic interests and strategies in Halifax in the 1830s. Accordingly the local financial system of three Halifax local banks, as local studies suggest,<sup>11</sup> was based on kinship, religious and political network. Associational life in Halifax was an alternative programme not only forging distinct identity and social relationships for the middle class but also stabilising the urban society. The Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society and the Halifax Mechanics' Institutes cultivated intellectual and neutral space for middling orders beyond party, sect and occupation in this local community. Mechanics' Institutes, for example, established mainly by craft groups in Halifax, were managed by the middle class after the early 1830s, when this institute tried to solve the problems of economic recession. The institutes rejected radical policies, such as the establishment of a political economy class in the 1830s.<sup>12</sup> These associations were supported and governed by a small local elite group, which included such individuals as the Tory banker, Christopher Rawson, a Tory merchant, John Waterhouse, the Whig banker, Rawdon Briggs, Jun., the Vicar, Charles Musgrave, and the Unitarian minister, William Turner. These associations were also welcomed by the Tory newspaper, *the Halifax Guardian*, managed by J.U. Walker, and the Whig/Liberal and Radical newspaper, *the Halifax and Huddersfield Express*, managed by Henry Martin.

---

<sup>9</sup> Hargreaves, *Halifax*, pp. 93-107; idem., 'Methodism', p. 151.

<sup>10</sup> Jowitt, 'Crossroads', pp. 20-25.

<sup>11</sup> Hudson, *Genesis*, chap. 9; Ling Roth, *Genesis*, pp.18-37.

<sup>12</sup> W(est) Y(orkshire) A(rchive) S(ervice), C(alderdale) D(istrict) A(rchives), Halifax Mechanics Institute, Minute Book, HMI: 1, 1825-1839.

Unquestionably, this distinct middle-class identity against other groups was forged in their hierarchical public institutions.<sup>13</sup>

### III

Public institutions based on limited pluralism for the middle class were consistently challenged by radical groups in these institutions, and by the collectivism of labouring people from the 1830s. Were these limited associational activities enough to regulate urban society for all inhabitants ? These frictions greatly expanded in Halifax Borough Election 1847, when there was serious division within the middle classes, and between the merger of the Whig/Liberal–Radical alliance, which had lasted since 1835, but which now collapsed. The Radical Dissenter group insisted on its liberty of religion and a ‘Voluntarism’ in public institutions, and the Chartists attacked middle-class liberalism based on public institutions and insisted on their alternative programme of governing public institutions by themselves.<sup>14</sup> Although Radicals and Chartists made a tactical alliance for the election of 1847, both candidates were defeated by Tory and Whig/Liberal candidates. Nevertheless Radicals and Chartists had penetrated other public institutions such as Mechanics’ Institute and the Halifax Municipal Borough Corporation incorporated in 1848. Subsequently they sought to maintain their power in these institutions.<sup>15</sup> The advocacy of ‘free trade’, which the middle class had espoused through the Anti-Corn Law Association in Halifax, was no longer a certain indicator of middle-class liberalism, because this radical group also supported liberal economic policy and sought power in current institutions. Therefore the middle class needed to reconsider how their pluralism in public institutions could be maintained and how to legitimise themselves in public institutions.

---

<sup>13</sup> Morris, *Class*, chap. 7, 10-13.

<sup>14</sup> Jowitt, ‘Crossroads’, pp.25-36.

<sup>15</sup> Tiller, ‘Chartism’.

The middle class affirmed their distinct identity through the development of moral and useful knowledge in the local community. They also legitimised themselves in the leadership and social unification of public institutions, and defined their local intellectual and physical space by their activity of institutions. 'Liberalism', 'social improvement' and 'class harmony society' as middle-class ideologies were significant in the forging of their strategy of regulating middle class practices and relationships, and legitimising themselves in the social hierarchy.

Social improvement and a society of class harmony had become the object of a powerful crusade in Halifax by the 1850s. In contrast to the attitudes of Jonathan Akroyd, his father, towards labouring people in two decades earlier, Edward Akroyd, an Anglican, and John, Francis and Joseph Crossley, Congregationalists, tried to create model villages in Halifax municipal borough to encourage social harmony for all classes from the end of the 1840s. Unlike Saltaire, the famous factory village in Shipley near Bradford,<sup>16</sup> these plans did not dramatically modify the over-all urban physical environment. But the construction of these two model villages was enough to make the people in Halifax recognise that these giant manufacturers were committed to social improvement and the society of class harmony. Furthermore Edward Akroyd improved financial institutions for middling and labouring people by establishing the saving bank and the building society. Francis Crossley tried to create a public open space such as the 'People's Park' where the people of all classes gathered in order to improve the urban conditions.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the instances in Leeds,<sup>18</sup> the manufacturers in Halifax provided strong leadership to the public park movement by donating the land to Municipal Borough. These activities intensified not only ideologies of social improvement and social harmony but also consciousness of the leadership of these giant manufacturers in public

---

<sup>16</sup> Reynolds, *Paternalist*.

<sup>17</sup> Green, *Religion*, chap. 1; Hargreaves, *Halifax*, chap. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Branston, 'Development'.

institutions.

The aim of social improvement provoked conflicts between utilitarians and economists about whether urban improvement was necessary, while the aldermen and councillors of Halifax Municipal Borough Corporation managed the limited budget in this Corporation.<sup>19</sup> Liberalism and a consciousness of social development in Victorian Halifax reduced the gap between utilitarians and economists in public institutions and provided a common intellectual base to discuss social policy. The principle of Free Trade was also a source of economic consensus for both utilitarians and economists in Halifax.

Consciousness of social harmony for all classes was the essential indicator distinguishing the middle-class radicals from labouring radicals, who were active in various labouring organisations and supported collectivism. The Halifax radical group from the 1830s to the 1850s was not dominated by a single united culture and strategy. Henry Martin, an ardent Congregationalist, who was publisher of the Whig/Liberal–Radical newspaper, *the Halifax and Huddersfield Express*, in the 1830s and of the Radical Dissenter newspaper, *the Halifax Reformer*, in the 1840s, not only supported the Halifax Anti-Corn Law Association and learned many strategic lessons from the success of this association but also campaigned for ‘Voluntarism’ on the Halifax Borough election in 1847 and accepted the strategic partnership between Radical Dissenter and Chartist.<sup>20</sup> Although he was also committed to open the Mechanics’ Institute to Radicals, he rejected labouring class collectivism and asserted the cause of class harmony in public institutions when radical labouring group tried to convert Mechanics’ Institute into an organisation for the working classes in the

---

<sup>19</sup> WYAS, CDA, Halifax Borough Minutes, HXM: 3, 1848 and passim.

<sup>20</sup> *Halifax Reformer*, Aug. 1847- June 1848.

1850s.<sup>21</sup> The middle-class radical was tied into a plurality of hierarchical public institutions, in which factional activity was controlled by the middle class ideology.

The representation of ‘the middle class’ as the principal actor in public institutions in Halifax was invented, defined and intensified by manufacturers’ activities in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Although public institutions in Halifax were managed by not only manufacturers but also merchants, bankers and professionals, manufacturers exemplified the ideologies such as social harmony for all classes, social improvement and liberalism. They also confronted popular movements like the Factory Movement, the Anti-Poor Law Movement, and Chartism, and by attacking these movements stabilised their ideologies and institutions.

#### IV

While middle-class ideologies became the essential strategy for public institutions, these institutions in Halifax in the second quarter of the nineteenth century possessed the power to regulate middle class activity and relationships. Their ideologies consolidated the middle-class belief and duty in public institutions. The representation of the ‘middle class’ in Halifax formalised the distinction between themselves and others by their ideologies. In the 1850s, the ‘manufacturer’ in Halifax was the principal group developing middle class ideologies in public institutions and intensifying their power in these institutions.

#### ***Foot Note References***

Branston, John Graham, ‘The Development of Public Open Spaces in Leeds during the Nineteenth Century’, M.Phil. thesis, University of Leeds (1972).

Green, S.J.D., *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1996).

Hargreaves, John A., *Halifax* (Edinburgh, 1999).

---

<sup>21</sup> WYAS, CDA, Halifax Mechanics Institute, Minute Book, HMI: 2 and 3, 1847-1859.



- Hargreaves, John A., 'Methodism and Electoral Politics in Halifax, 1832-1848', *Northern History*, 35 (1999).
- Howe, Anthony, *The Cotton Masters, 1830-1860* (Oxford, 1984).
- Hudson, Pat, *The Genesis of Industrial Capital: a Study of the West Riding Wool Textile Industry c. 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1986).
- Koditschek, Theodore, *Class Formation and Urban-industrial Society: Bradford, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1990).
- Jowitt, J.A., 'A Crossroads in Halifax Politics: Election of 1847', *Transaction of the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1973).
- Morris, R.J., *Class, Sect and Party: the Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990).
- Reynolds, Jack, (1983). *The Great Paternalist: Titus Salt and the Growth of Nineteenth Century Bradford* (London, 1983).
- Ling Roth, H., *The Genesis of Banking in Halifax with Side Lights on Country Banking*, (Halifax, 1914).
- Seed, John, 'From "Middling Sort" to Middle Class in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-century England', in M.L. Bush, ed., *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification* (London, 1992).
- Nenadic, Stana, 'Businessmen, the Urban Middle Class, and the "Dominance" of Manufacturers in Nineteenth-Century', *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991).
- Smail, John, *The Origins of Middle-Class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire, 1660-1780* (Ithaca, 1994).
- Tiller, Kate, 'Late Chartism: Halifax 1847-58', in James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson, eds., *Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London, 1982).
- Wolff, Janet, and Seed, John, eds., *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-century Middle Class* (Manchester, 1988).