Introduction

At a recent academic conference dedicated to labour history, one participant posed a final question at the end of her paper. Pondering why popular protest erupts in some areas but not others, despite the prevalence of similar economic conditions and common demographics, she concluded that the historiography was lacking on this topic and in need of further research. While her query was in relation to the Swing Riots of the early nineteenth century, this question could easily have also applied to late twentieth-century Britain, during the painful period of de-industrialisation, a time when mass unemployment erupted to record levels and was particularly damaging in the manufacturing belts of northern England.

The last quarter of the twentieth century was most certainly an alienating age for a large percentage of the British working class. Many within this group had gone abruptly from living the promise of upward mobility in the immediate post-war years to suddenly confronting the cold slap of rising unemployment and record level inflation in the 1970s. The remedy prescribed by the City for this malaise was left to the devices of market forces and placed in the care of Margaret Thatcher. Some would argue that the result which followed for much of the British working class was a marginalised world of displaced communities and an end to meaningful work. Furthermore, they would submit this period signalled the parting of a set of values held in common by working-class people and a decline in what was once a pervasive collective class consciousness.

Yet just as in the era of Captain Swing, a time when some agricultural labourers from random rural areas banded together in armed rebellion, while others from nearby and similar localities accepted their fate with quiet despair, the question arises, can a comparable fragmented pattern of resistance also apply during the callous days of de-industrialising in 1980s Britain? This question is raised in light of how certain heavily industrialised British conurbations struggled against the neoliberal

economic policies of Thatcher with ferocious abandon, while populations in comparable cities remained noticeably silent. Indeed, why was the right-wing economic agenda under Thatcher even welcomed by some segments of the British working class, but fervently obstructed by blue-collar workers in other areas?

There will be an attempt at answering such questions by highlighting the often contentious role that the city of Liverpool played during this age of Thatcher and in the immediate years which followed. Such answers must be pursued in order to determine why it was in Liverpool that much of the war against Thatcherism was centred and so fiercely fought.

There is no doubt that Liverpool was not a lone voice of protest during the turbulent 1980s. There were demonstrations, strikes, occupations, revolts against governmental authorities and even riots in some major British cities during this volatile period. However, after searching historical archives dedicated to this issue it is obvious that the national press often set their sights squarely on Merseyside as the ground-zero for much of the working-class unrest erupting in this period. Perhaps this was done with a prejudicial bias, or maybe there was an element of truth that supported the stereotype of Liverpool being at the barricades of trade union militancy. Nevertheless, the ready mimicry of the 'whinging bolshie Scouser', often sneered at by bourgeois detractors from the Home Counties, seemed an ever-ready stereotype permanently stamped onto the lexis of British popular culture. A perusal of press reports from the time documents factory occupations in Manchester, a number of wildcat strikes in Glasgow, urban unrest in Birmingham and revolts within the Greater London Council. However, for every dispatch reporting such incidents, there appeared many more pieces focusing instead on similar activities occurring in Liverpool.

This raises the question, was there something unique about Liverpool which would stoke more resentment, anger and passion into the fires of popular discontent during these turbulent years? Perhaps it was not just the intensity of resistance alone which marked out Liverpool as 'peculiar'. News accounts made it clear that the region was host to a whole gamut of protest, in which nearly every tactical form of dissent imaginable was utilised by a working class increasingly at odds with the modernity encapsulating a post-industrial existence.

Nevertheless, the enormous impact structural unemployment had on this community was in evidence for many years prior to the onslaught of mass de-industrialisation and the neoliberal settlement of Thatcherism. Indeed, statistics demonstrate that throughout the entire twentieth

century Liverpool and the Merseyside region consistently experienced unemployment rates at twice the national level – in good times and in bad. Therefore, we must probe whether it was this protracted and painful familiarity with poverty, degradation and joblessness which propelled the working class of Liverpool into becoming the focal point of resistance to Thatcher's neoliberal policies, or if, indeed, the city was merely a convenient media target, ever ready to live up to the usual, tired stereotypes.

Liverpool has alternate themes from its past besides the persistent dilemma of chronic joblessness. Therefore, before drawing any conclusions about Liverpool's connections with working-class radicalism we must examine the role of competing identities other than that of class alone. For instance, the city's association with pre-war sectarianism between competing working-class tribes, coupled with Liverpool's powerful connections to Catholic Ireland have always marked the city as 'awkward' in comparison to other English provincial centres. In many ways Liverpool was more akin to Belfast or Glasgow than most typically 'English cities'.

What is certain is that by the 1980s it was not just the sheer volume of resistance to Thatcher's policies absorbing much of Liverpool's working class; rather, it was also the growing variety of tactics employed in organising these confrontations. Consequently, it can be said that in no other British city had the struggle against Thatcher's redundancies, closures and cuts taken on so many different hues of resistance as was demonstrated in late twentieth-century Liverpool.

In the following chapters several of these campaigns will be examined in further detail. We shall witness how dejected car workers, suffering the devastation of a plant closure, regrouped and railed against both trade union mandarins and the British establishment through reorganising the local branch of their former trade union as a means of mobilising Liverpool's unemployed. A number of significant movements arose from their efforts in politicising many of the area's redundant workforce, notably the establishment of the Transport and General Workers' Union, 6/612 Branch of the Unemployed.

A further chapter in this work will be dedicated to defining what sparked and sustained the Toxteth riots over the long hot summer of 1981. Questions need to be answered concerning what effect youth unemployment played in stoking the fires of resentment in this civil strife. It is especially poignant when one considers how the pains of joblessness provoked an alienated new generation of working-class youth with no visible structures of support or trade unions to turn to for advice and assistance. Dissecting the overarching factors behind this urban unrest

will highlight the roles race and age now had as possible competing identities to class, and how such dynamics possibly altered previous conceptions of working-class consciousness.

Thatcher's backdoor use of local governmental structures as a means to enact some of her most unpopular economic policies will also be queried. It must be asked why it was Liverpool, once again, which defied convention and elected a radical-left Trotskyist controlled council in 1983 in order to counteract her government's agenda. Indeed, this was a council whose *raison d'être* was defying Thatcher's mandates of rate-capping and swingeing cuts on local government. Local government would never be the same in Liverpool after Derek Hatton and his followers took the reins of power. The underlying question remains, what provoked a local council once known more for sectarian divisions and parochial conservatism to become so radically leftist in outlook?

Examining this period of mass unemployment, when so many well-paid, unionised jobs haemorrhaged from the local Merseyside economy, questions arise whether self-interest could corrode and replace what remained of strict working-class solidarity. This point is explored in the case of striking shipyard workers at Cammell Laird Shipyards in Birkenhead, who not only defied their trade union bosses by occupying their worksite, but also battled with a large number of their workmates involving such issues as workplace sectionalism and bitter internal squabbles regarding redundancy pay. Such divisions provoke thoughts of whether individual self-interest had finally trumped solidarity at this point in the labour movement. Indeed, had the forward march of labour finally been halted by this point as Eric Hobsbawm prophesied?[1] Did so many of the cherished working-class values as solidarity and mutualism fade into the past, while people sought wider identities beyond the confines of class?

As Thatcherism blended into the ascent of New Labour – a period often seen as a time when trade union power had been almost entirely neutered – a question from Liverpool's docks asks why, then, would 500 ageing Liverpool dockworkers risk their pensions and seniority all for the sake of not crossing a picket line? What would prompt these 'dinosaurs' from a distant past to unfurl the old banners of trade union militancy, and insist on maintaining ties of solidarity with their striking comrades? Had Liverpool's rebellious dockers remained committed to the old working-class values of solidarity, mutuality, collectivism and political radicalism, while labour bosses elsewhere timidly signed on to the 'new reality'?

With these many questions in mind, it must be emphasised from the beginning that this analysis adopts a theoretical perspective loosely

derived from the eminent historian E. P. Thompson and his writings on class and class-consciousness. In contrast to previous economic histories of the period concerning the Industrial Revolution, which had treated 'labour' or the 'working class' in an abstract fashion, as victims acted upon by inexorable economic forces, Thompson famously focused his work on rescuing industrialisation's 'losers', such as handloom weavers or poor stockingers, from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.

The overarching thesis of Thompson's seminal work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, contested notions of working-class passivity and inserted human agency into the heart of the raw process of industrialisation. Thompson insisted that far from being pliant bystanders subject to the decisions of economic and political elites, the English working class was an active participant in its own 'making'. In an intellectual masterpiece of 'history from below', he recreated the complex occupational and political subcultures of opposition that culminated in a pervasive sense of working-class consciousness by 1832.[2]

Thompson's work has been subject to extensive elaboration, emulation and critique. His critics argued, with varying degrees of justification, that his work focused on radical labour elites at the expense of other plebeian groups who retained loyalty to the monarchy and Church. Critics also point to Thompson's flawed emphasis on class homogeneity and his neglect of ethnic and sectional divisions, gender bias and ethnocentrism, as well as a romantic view of cultural agency that underestimated structural constraints.

Allowing for such criticisms and despite the chronological distance between Thompson's opus and this study, his framework retains significant resonance for the subject of this analysis. If it has become commonplace among labour historians to proffer that the working class was an agent in its own making during industrialisation, it is equally plausible to argue that it displayed similar qualities of active resistance as it was seemingly becoming 'unmade' during the years of de-industrialisation. Thus, in the following chapters, the unemployed docker, the redundant car worker, the jobless youth are not portrayed merely as victims of the Thatcherite transformation of Britain's industrial economy. Indeed, it is their understanding of, and ultimately, their reaction to these ever more deteriorating conditions which lies at the heart of their humanity.

In the spirit of Thompson, an emphasis should be made of how groups of workers on Merseyside creatively responded to the predicaments of unemployment with their own set of strategies and sense of social agency. It must be examined if these people responded to increasing joblessness and growing penury by drawing on pre-existing concepts of justice, equity and solidarity. The same values, of course, which had been

instilled in many of them from a long established culture and a history made by their predecessors. Nevertheless, taking account of the critiques of Thompson, this study recognises the need to go beyond the experience of white, male, unionised workers to embrace what women, ethnic minorities and unorganised groups did in their collective response to permanent redundancy, and locate the strategic choices they made within the prevailing material conditions. Indeed, it is not assumed that women were automatically absorbed into the same notion of working-class experience as men. Therefore, the gendering of class-consciousness and how women came to understand the economic changes associated with the neoliberal turn will also be explored within the context of the case studies examined.

A final word must be included regarding the methodology employed in this research. Given that much of this study involves an investigation into contemporary and local events, little historiographical work has been written thus far on a number of the topics addressed. Moreover, some of the developments examined in the chapters that follow left no written records. Therefore, it was decided to embark on an extensive network of oral interviews, often involving many of the principal activists involved in the campaigns examined.

The use of oral testimony in itself presents its own set of problems recognisable to most historians who deal in contemporary topics. Personal biases from the interviewee and indeed the questioner, along with the inaccuracies of interpretation and the often unreliable recollections associated with memory, are a few of the most common problems related to corroborating historical evidence. Critics may point to the subjectivity of oral history, but its use as a source has undeniably added to the wealth of interpreting the past, particularly in 'histories from below', and as a vehicle of expression for those in the past who were 'hidden from history'. Oral history often proves to be a valuable means in recovering agency, which is a principal focus of this study. In addition, this method of enquiry provides an intimacy with the past, as it allows both the interviewee and the historian to participate in the formation of the historical narrative, thus democratising to some extent the interpretation of events studied. Indeed, a number of the quotations herein were so vivid, they spoke for themselves. It somehow did not seem fitting to needlessly step on their words with further interpolations and unrequired explanations from the narrator unless further clarification was necessary.

However, whilst this research relied on a fairly wide use of face-to-face interviews from historical actors, it should not be considered a strict study in oral history, per se. The interviews were employed in order to illuminate areas where other sources were either not available

or questionable regarding their factual accuracy. Nevertheless, it is not asserted anywhere in this work that these interviews are intended to be a representative sample.

Time progresses and in the post-2008 market-crash era we now have the proper perspective and distance to reflect on those pivotal final twenty-five years of the twentieth century. Did the English working class really crawl off and die after the loss of the Miners' Strike in 1985? Perhaps the English working class was not killed off by the forces of Thatcher and unfettered global capital, but was merely transformed from an industrial-based collective to a more servile pool of hands – still working class, albeit no longer dressed in blue collars and employed in factories, but now kitted-up in polyester uniform shirts emblazed with garish corporate logos, working long hours in supermarkets, warehouses and call-centres.

The following pages cannot directly answer that question, but this work will seek to understand why Liverpool took such a leading role in the battle against the forces of global capital in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and why this resistance occurred here with such passion. In order to proceed further we must establish what made Liverpool such a magnet for confrontation.

Notes

1 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, September 1978, pp. 279–86.
2 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966).