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SPECIAL FEATURE

The Long Shadow of the Working Class Movement

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Abstract

This paper explores how the years after World War II in Western Europe were an extreme case of working-class power. An initial theoretical discussion claims that while class can best be understood as a social category, at the same time politics in the broadest sense—and hence class-based movements—can shape social structure. This was the case in the in the post-World War II period when the working class dominated West European societies: especially perhaps in Britain, the "weight" of the working class shaped the nation. Trade union organization and state power ensured collective rights and were the basis for autonomous consumption; class identity was a source of pride. The end of this period saw trade union density continuing to increase. In the USA as well as in Western Europe, the power of management in the workplace was challenged. Especially in Western Europe, there was widespread radicalization of working-class youth. This was the last offensive of the working-class movement. However, power in the workplace remained essentially a veto-power. In the USA, oppositional politics became ethnic politics and even before de-industrialisation the white working class began to abandon its traditional politics. Nonetheless, in Western Europe the long shadow of the working-class movement ensured the partial survival of social rights long after the traditional social basis of the movement had withered away.

Keywords: autonomous consumption; class theory; union density

Introduction

It is all too easy to write "200 years of socialism" as a history of defeats and unrealized dreams. However, this paper argues that the West European working class movement has influenced the very shape of West European society—and that long after the working class had left the stage the impact of the working class movement lived on. From this perspective the early 1970s are a crucial inflection point.

The paper begins with the claim that we have to understand class as not simply an outgrowth of social structure, but as something that can actually shape social structure. Then, using in particular the case of Britain, it highlights the brief post-World War II period in which the working class in some senses dominated West European

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societies—a period in which the working class was almost the ruling class! The third section shows how the conflicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s marked a new level of opposition but one which was far more extensive in West Europe than in the USA. As the fourth section shows, the insurgency of those years of the decade did die down, but West European societies would retain and indeed develop a distinctive social model, distinctive above all from the USA. West European societies were more equal than the USA, West European societies had stronger and more extensive welfare states, and most crucially and least discussed, the universalistic politics of class took longer to collapse into the politics of ethnic bargaining and identity self-reference.

A little bit of big theory

Some terminological clarification is needed. Outside of early 20th century Marxist hagiography it is difficult to seriously argue that "the working class" or even "the proletariat" (or perhaps even its opposite, "the bourgeoisie") actually *does* anything. Political organizations, social movements, informal networks can do things, a social category cannot. However, for much of the 19th and 20th centuries there were organizations—cooperatives, trade unions, political parties—that claimed to represent the working class (defined originally as wage-earning manual workers) and which did disproportionately recruit from this category. Furthermore, alongside and within these institutions there were extensive social networks and social connections which also had this distinctive class character. This "working class movement" was more than the formal organizations which were its most politically visible component. The "movement" was not coextensive with the class—many participants were non-proletarian, many proletarians were not members. At the same time, the movement as social movement was only distinctive by nature of the existence of the working class on which it was based. Positing the possible existence of a "working class movement" means political organizations (parties, trade unions …) can be put in their social context so that politics is not reduced to formal organizations while at the same time avoiding the worship of "spontaneity" ….

This political movement is not simply the outgrowth of social structure, it can actually shape social structure. At its simplest: politics effects the distribution of income. As we shall see, the varying strength of the working class movement across time and space is arguably the key determinant of changes in income distribution in Western capitalist societies. And income distribution itself is also about social structure. Consider for example the effects of rising incomes at the top of the income pyramid: the growth of luxury crafts and luxury personal services. Equally, the rising incomes of the "service class" (say the top 10 percent of the income distribution) have generated more low paid service sector workers. There has been a growth of domestic servants, often immigrants and frequently illegal, with the curious consequence that educated women's labor market participation now correlates with the extent of low skilled immigration.[1]

Changes in occupational structure lead necessarily to the issue of the welfare state. At its simplest the welfare states of Western Europe ensured that even today there are significant differences between the USA[2] and Western Europe in terms of occupational structure. Much more fundamental was the specific occupational structure of

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state socialist societies, even though this escaped much serious analysis in Western social science. Western common-sense awareness of these societies focused on the lack of consumer goods (queuing, shortages, etc.) and of course political unfreedom even in the 40 years after the end of Stalinist terror. Yet the other side to this was the narrowed income distribution and the way in which elite wealth was hidden rather than displayed. The command economy engendered more manufacturing and fewer private services than in the West.[3] In these societies rapid forced industrialization and/or political transformation created high levels of social mobility followed by a new rigidity as the children of the new political elite gained priority access to higher education. Even then, the compressed social structure of these societies in ensured greater social mixing across occupational divisions in terms of recreation, housing, and marriage.[4]

Such issues should be the domain of empirical sociology, even though much analysis has been left to political economists given the collapse of so much sociology into cultural studies and American identity politics. We can identify these differences in income, we can at least propose a plausible explanation in the strength of "working class" politics (although actually tracing the causal links is rather more difficult).

However, the influence of the working class movement on society goes much further than this and is much more difficult to conceptualize. Rather weakening the claim that classes don't do anything, one way to understand the achievements—and losses—of the last 100 years is to talk about the *weight* of the working class. This would seem to have two elements. First, social relations … Every now and then Marxist social historians have attempted to find that will of the wisp—"class consciousness"—by looking at the form of social relations within the working class: who meets whom, who goes out with whom, who talks to whom, who knows whom, who values whom. So if ethnic groups are segregated (in terms of housing area, marriage, etc.) as opposed to intermixed simply in terms of income, then we claim a lack of class consciousness. Equally, if housing or marriage is disproportionately shaped by occupation, then it is suggested that there is again a lack of "class consciousness."[5] Conversely, one of the striking features of everyday life in the DDR was the extent of such social intermixing across what we might want to call class divisions.[6]

This is all comfortingly empirical. Yet to really grasp the "weight" of the working class we need to enter the realm of ideology and cultural studies. Crucial is the extent to which "class" is seen as positive rather than negative, a badge of respect and belonging rather than something to be dismissed or denied. And at a grander level weight involves how the society and crucially the nation itself is understood. While it does seem to be the case that the self-description of the state socialist societies as "workers' states" had some real resonance for ordinary workers, it is worth asking whether anything similar occurred at certain points and certain places in the West.

The first empirical part of this paper pursues this question, arguing that in the immediate post-World War II period Western European societies were marked by the *weight* of the working class. The next part recounts the now rather forgotten upsurge of the working class movement at the end of the 1960s and the third part claims that while the upsurge was defeated, through the consolidation of the welfare state it shaped the income distribution and occupational structure at least until the end of the century. The working class may have left the stage, but its shadow remained.

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The working class at home

My old man's a dustman
He wears a dustman's hat
He wears 'cor blimey trousers
And lives in a council flat[7]

The post-World War II compromise in Western Europe was based on the numerical importance of manual working class jobs. Crucially industry meant not just coal and heavy industry but also new mass production industry in rapidly expanding cities such as Birmingham or Milan. Birmingham was the center of the British car industry, the "miracle" of Milan was the tumultuous expansion of Italian white goods manufacturing.[8] Especially in Britain, "work" meant manual work and manual work, especially factory work, provided the template through which employment was understood.[9]

In this period for many manual workers—especially those who identified with the labor movement—manual work was of higher status than white-collar work because it was self-evidently socially useful. Asked to rank occupations in a 1950s study, one respondent from East London replied: "I've put all people who do physical labour at the top. They're absolutely essential"; "clerks" were ranked lower since "Anybody can push a pen along."[10]

These valuations were involved in a more general positive distinct identity for manual work. They were interwoven with the strength of the working class movement (left-wing parties which claimed to represent "the working class" and trade unions based predominantly on manual workers). Significantly, rather than attempting to distance themselves from manual workers, many white-collar workers also considered themselves as "workers." In Britain popular mobilization in World War II had given a new legitimacy to "workers" and those organizations that represented them. Indeed, in Britain World War II was defined as a "people's war"[11] and the victory was seen as won largely by working people—epitomized by working class East London in the Blitz.[12]

Yet this new privileging of workers was not restricted to Britain. Everywhere across Western Europe working people felt that they had real influence: In Sweden a survey of two industrial towns in 1949 reported that among manual workers who considered themselves working class 47 percent of men and 32 percent of women answered that their class had "the greatest influence in Sweden."[13] In France and Italy to be a "worker" was a label of pride and a more political identity, linked especially to the mass communist parties (PCF, PCI), their affiliated trade unions and the (somewhat mythologized) anti-fascist struggle of the mid-1940s.[14] Rather later, national understanding of the (West) German Wirtschaftswunder also gave German *workers* a privileged role in reconstruction.

At work and in consumption, the social relations of manual workers involved collective power, epitomized by regular and secure employment, the right to housing, social welfare, and perhaps above all, to respect. These achievements were not the automatic outgrowth of the structure of industrial society, they depended on trade union organization in the workplace, political representation in local government, and above all, state power.

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It is clear that in Britain this meant a reconceptualization of the nation. As in particular Todd has argued, "during and after the Second World War … the working class became 'the people,' whose interests were synonymous with those of Britain itself."[15] This is the *weight* of the working class—the definition of who we the people actually are—a class-based national citizenship.

Looking back on a classic study of working class East London in the 1950s, Dench et al. described the 1950s as a "golden age" in which the people of the East End felt a valued part of society (not least because they had faced the Blitz).[16] Working people had a new prosperity and new possibilities:

> The year 1957, when *Family and Kinship* was published, probably marked the high tide of that brief golden age: a kind of sunlit upland plateau in which the working class basked in their new found enfranchisement and prosperity.[17]

Prosperity meant the end of unemployment and meant rising living standards. While sociologists fretted that the purchase of consumer durables meant "embourgeoisement" and the intelligentsia began to snigger at ordinary people's "consumerism," trade union leaders articulated working class autonomy. As the president of the National Union of Mineworkers argued:

> What is wrong with the leader of a union wanting a nice house for each of his members to live in? What is wrong with wanting a good standard of living for his wife and family, a good education for the children, a Jaguar at the front door to take him to work and a Mini at the side to take his wife shopping?[18]

In fact by the 1970s the idea that the married working class woman should be dependent on her husband was under threat—by working class women themselves (see next section). Yet criticism of working class consumption aspirations ignores two things. First, such aspirations were in part "autonomous consumption" rather than simply the copying of existing socially approved standards. Second and more importantly, such aspirations were achieved collectively: higher wages in particular were the result of trade union organization.

Collective consumption was epitomized by housing. "A nice house" was achieved largely through the massive expansion of state-funded housing ("council housing" in Britain). And the change in access to housing was crucial to the decline of any collective achievement. Until the 1970s access to housing for British manual working class families was a right based on time on a waiting list. However, the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act prioritized housing in terms of need. Increasingly social housing became charity for the poor, not a right for the worker.[19] This change from entitlement based on collective citizenship to officially determined "need" epitomized the changed nature of the welfare state:

> The evolution of the welfare state had turned it from a mutual aid society writ large, as it seemed at first, into a complex, centralised and bureaucratic system run by middle-class do-gooders who gave generously to those who put nothing into the pot while making ordinary working people who did contribute feel like recipients of charity when drawing their own entitlements … dignity

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> has been taken out of citizenship … welfare has simply become a new form of charity.[20]

While these changes began in the 1970s in Britain, the Hartz IV reforms had the same impact in Germany in the 2000s, replacing insurance and rights-based unemployment benefits with means-tested allowances[21] and de-collectivizing social rights. Equally, the current labor market "reforms" in Southern Europe are intended to ensure that everywhere welfare is based on "need" not rights.

Most difficult to trace, and most easily misunderstood, has been the simple loss of esteem, of the erosion of the sense that the working class had become the People or even the nation. The end of such class-based national citizenship is charted by the decline in the extent to which people define themselves as "working class" (self-ascribed social class) in social surveys. In Britain the proportion of voters describing themselves as "working class" fell from 64 percent in 1964 to 57 percent in 2005.[22] Similar falls have been noticed for Germany.[23] Once most British people defined themselves as "working class." Now working class means "chav" and is no longer a label people can wear with pride.[24]

The forgotten revolts of the 1960s and their aftermath

> So though I'm a working man
> I can ruin the government's plan
> Though I'm not too hard
> The sight of my card
> Makes me some kind of superman.
>
> Oh you don't get me out of the union
> You don't get me out of the union
> You don't get me out of the union
> Till the day I die.[25]

Trade union density (the proportion of employees who are union members) rose rapidly after the end of World War II, not least because unions were identified with the struggle against fascism. Twenty years later the celebrated May events in France in 1968 and the "hot autumn" of 1969 in Italy were only the peaks of a rank and file mobilization that occurred in virtually every democratic European country.[26] Here from 1968 to 1973 strikes were not only more numerous than in the previous period, but they involved more workers and lasted longer. Industrial conflict often took more radical forms—demands were pressed by go-slows, occupations, even sabotage. Crucially there was a shift *downward* in the locus of organization and initiative. Strikes and other forms of action were more likely to occur on the immediate initiative of the rank and file and there was an associated shift toward workplace and enterprise bargaining. Although most demands remained focused on wages,[27] more "qualitative" demands were also raised: for better working conditions and for more control of the work process and even in some cases for a compression of the wage hierarchy.

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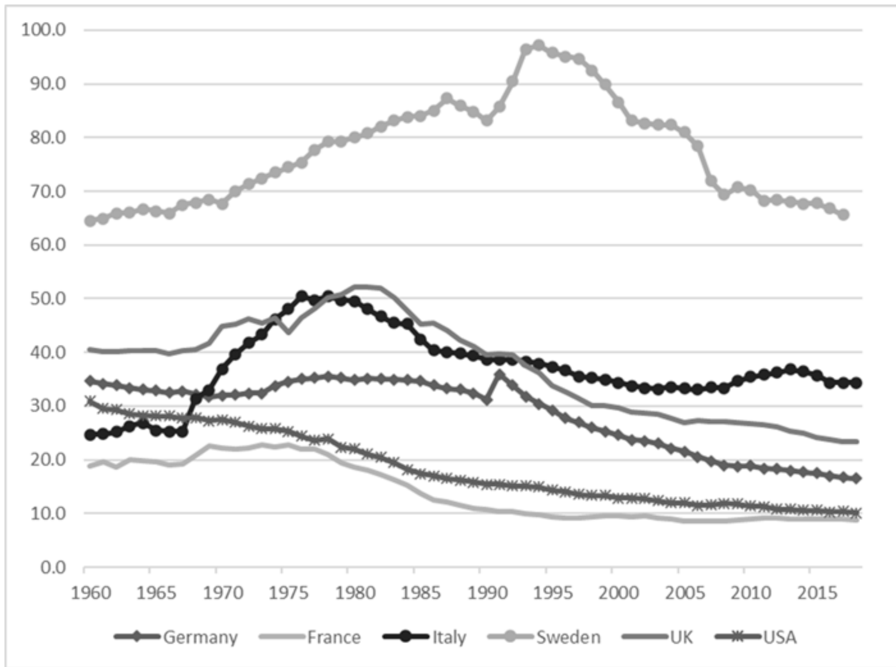

Figure 1. Trade Union Density 1960–2016.
Source: Derived from J. Visser, ICTWSS Database. Version 6.1. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies (AIAS), University of Amsterdam, November 2019.

In virtually every country union membership continued to rise through the 1970s, with membership growing in both manufacturing and service sector occupations (Figure 1). Unions had unprecedented coverage and arguably unprecedented veto power. May 1968 in France was telegenic because of the student riots in the Left Bank of Paris, but those interwove with mass strikes and occupations in factories and other workplaces. Such links between students and "workers" (who actually included many white collar employees) were also very clear in the Italian "Hot Autumn" of 1969, and, in a much weaker form, in Britain and Germany. Everywhere across Europe the early 1970s were a period of trade union militancy and a politicization of some young working class people.[28]

Remarkably this mobilization in Europe was briefly paralleled in the USA. While the 1960s are seen as the birth of a global student movement and of hippy subcultures, almost completely ignored is the accompanying trade union mobilization. Even more so than in Europe, this was based on a new rank-and-file militancy which involved bitter internal conflicts over union democracy with rank and file candidates elected to leadership in the mineworkers' and steelworkers' unions. Furthermore, and in a dramatic break with traditions of American business unionism, workers began to raise demands over the organization of work. All of this was epitomized in the conflict at General Motors' Lordstown plant peaking with the strike of 1972.[29]

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These new demands came from a class that was newly affluent and where young men (and increasingly young women) had no fear of unemployment. Mass production jobs were doubtless regular, but boring and uninteresting. In the words of the contemporary "Liverpool Poet" Adrian Henry, "There's jobs for everyone and nobody wants them."[30] In the factories young workers often did not just want more pay, they just didn't want to work. As an account of conflict in Ford's Halewood plant recounted, "militant" shop stewards realized that this destroyed the whole rationale of traditional union bargaining.[31]

The movement still overwhelmingly male; men dominated union organization. However, by the late 1960s the demand for equal pay was coming from unionized women workers, epitomized by Dagenham women machinists' strike of 1968. Indeed, the context for the celebrated Defrenne case at the European Court of Justice (ECJ) was strikes by Belgian women engineering workers demanding equal pay. The origin of the EU equal pay directives lay in demands from women workers, whereas now gender equality is concerned with equal representation on company boards.

In Western Europe this mobilization was also part of ethnic integration. The post-World War II immigration to Europe was immigration into industrial society. Immigrant workers joined workplaces that were often large and unionized. Immigrants accordingly were trying to gain entry into this industrial working class and gain equal rights within it. The process was hardly smooth. In Britain in 1963 union members campaigned against the employment of "colored" workers on the buses.[32] However, by the turn of the century immigrant groups were strongly represented in unions, and within all occupational groups Afro-Caribbean workers were more likely to be union members than white workers.[33]

By contrast, in the USA the popular movement was above all a resurgence of ethnic politics—the Civil Rights movement developed into black power and the ghetto riots. Political change in the 1970s meant on the one hand a sustained assault on racism and on a scale unparalleled in Europe, but on the other hand a form of cultural politics which meant that "liberal" issues became increasingly disconnected from the overt concerns of the majority of Americans. Worse, policies such as bussing (the compulsory transport of children to different school areas in order to desegregate public education) pitted black and white working class families against each other. American "liberals" thus created the conditions for Nixon's "New Majority" strategy which successfully used cultural issues to begin the process whereby the US white ethnic working class was peeled away from the Democratic party. For working class America, the birth of the neoliberal order[34] was not so much deindustrialization, for that was yet to come, but the new identity politics.

The long shadow of the working class movement

The strike waves of the late 1960s and 1970s were the last mobilization of the traditional working class, the last time that there was an offensive of the working class movement. Deindustrialization and the destruction of manual jobs in large scale industry took somewhat different forms in different European countries—more extreme in Britain, more guided in Germany.[35] Within 20 years the occupational structure and the world of work was transformed. Traditional manual working class jobs, whether

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in heavy industry, manufacturing or even public services, became a minority. And perhaps only in Britain did this happen so quickly and so brutally as in the United States.

With deindustrialization the organizations of the working class movement continued, but now with a changed social base. Most West European governments did not follow Thatcher in explicitly rejecting cooperation with unions, but they did increasingly abandon Keynesian demand management. Trade union density declined under the Schröder SPD government in Germany and under Blair's New Labour in Britain. The main exception was Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries (as well as Belgium) where the so-called "Ghent system" involved trade unions in the administration of social insurance, so there only in the new century did union density also begin to decline (Figure 1).

Everywhere state employment has become the new heartland of trade union membership. Even in Germany, IGMetall (the metal workers union centered on the crucial car industry) has been overtaken by Ver.di, essentially the public services union. This has changed the profile of union membership: Union members are increasingly likely to be well educated, have "middle class" jobs, and to be women. By the turn of the century trade union density in Sweden was higher amongst women than amongst men, as it has been in the UK since 2004; British union members are likely to be middle income earners and especially amongst women, the likelihood of union membership increases with education.[36] Trade unions and trade union membership may remain strong, but unions now recruit from a wide range of occupations, disproportionately in the state sector middle mass.[37]

This long organizational shadow is surely the major explanation for the divergence between Western Europe and the USA that became more marked at the end of the century and which continues to this day. The USA was already more unequal than European countries in the 1970s, but from that then on inequality in the USA grew rapidly. For most Americans real wages have hardly increased for 50 years, with all the benefits of economic growth appropriated by the top 10 percent (and in particular the top 1 percent). Income inequality has been growing in Europe, but the USA remains an outlier.

Interwoven with inequality of income is the welfare state. West European societies continued to redistribute income from upper income to lower income groups on a scale unimaginable in the USA. At the same time, West European states provided public services which were free or at reduced cost. Meanwhile in the USA the end of the Great Society program meant that "welfare" came to mean limited forms of income support for the poor, concentrated in the urban ghettos. It had less and less to do with the unionized working class. Whereas until the 1960s studies of the welfare state assumed that its expansion was an inherent part of any industrial society, by the end of the 1970s such convergence was no longer plausible. The Atlantic suddenly deepened.

Conclusion: Losses, dilemmas, residues

Looking back at nearly three quarters of a century of the working class movement in Western Europe, we can ask: what was achieved and then lost, what dilemmas faced the movement at its strongest, and what traces remain?

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Although the question is posed in relation to Western Europe, the paper has concentrated on the British case. Not because Britain was normal, but because arguably some of the early achievement was strongest, the subsequent dilemma most acute, and the residue weakest.

It was in post-World War II Britain that the achievements were most palpable and most in line with what ordinary people actually wanted and valued. Political power ensured the collective achievement of full employment and rights-based social citizenship as well as material resources that began to enable autonomous consumption (however much this worried middle class intellectuals). At a very fundamental level, working people had self-esteem, they made the society their society. And within not much more than a quarter of a century, this was all lost.

The late 1960s and the 1970s saw a popular mobilization of workers reaching new areas of society, integrating women and immigrants of the Gastarbeiter generation into the movement. However, this raised a new dilemma. Once wages were detached from any obvious market determinant and became based on workers' power and esteem, there was no "natural" limit to them. This was clearest perhaps in the miners strikes (1984–1985) when the miners' demand became that no colliery should ever be closed. Across much of Western Europe national incomes policies and corporatist national level bargaining became the solution—the way to which had already been shown by Sweden in the 1930s. In Britain the "modernization" programs of the Wilson Labour governments can be seen at steps in this direction but the very strength of rank-and-file trade unionists at the shop floor level made this impossible. This in turn ensured that Thatcher's onslaught on trade union rights was inevitable. This specific national experience raised the fundamental dilemma for trade union mobilization in this period: what if anything could be achieved by popular power at the workplace?

The counter-revolution in Britain began the process whereby the UK has become closer and closer to the USA in terms of inequality and marketization. Elsewhere, despite the almost universal decline of unions and subsequently of social democratic parties, the long shadow of the working class movement continued. During the long night of neoliberalism there was some resistance to growing inequality, some protection of the welfare state and some survival of social ideals. This is perhaps enough of a residue to ensure that new egalitarian social movements will not have to collapse into American identity politics.

Notes

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5. The key text here was John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974).

6. Mau op cit.

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15. Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010* (London: John Murray, 2014), Introduction.
16. Dench et al., op. cit. Soon after the end of the war there were memorials to the Blitz in working class areas of the East End. Carefully maintained during the 1950s and 1960s, these are now meaningless to the new immigrant population of the area.
17. Dench et al., op. cit., p. 20.
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