



SURVEY AND SPECULATION

# In search of the bourgeoisie: Bob Morris and the urban history of class

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## Abstract

Bob (or R.J.) Morris was probably best known in academic circles for his histories of class and specifically the British middle class. This essay traces his thinking about class in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain from an early study of class consciousness to his later attempts to rework ideas about social structure and culture in a post-Weberian direction. A feature of this intellectual trajectory was the increasing importance of the city and urban place in the account of class formation, most evident in his work on Leeds. In the process, Bob carved out a distinctive type of urban social history which has proved highly influential in historical studies of social structure not only in Britain but in Europe and beyond.

In 1983, I began a Ph.D. on the middle class in mid-Victorian Manchester and Liverpool. Like a diligent research student, I set about combing through the existing literature on the urban middle class – not especially voluminous at the time – looking for sources to help identify a recognizable ‘middle-class’ population and the methods to analyse it. In the early 1980s, the most sophisticated research was being carried out by Dr R.J. Morris of Edinburgh University (not Bob at this point, especially not to a graduate student) on the social structure of Leeds, another manufacturing and mercantile centre, at a slightly earlier historical period, 1820–50. So I wrote to Dr Morris asking if he could send information on his project. A couple of weeks later, a large package arrived comprising a single continuous computer sheet, produced on a dot matrix printer with perforated edges. On the pages, there were a series of codes and numbers related to data sets on religious affiliation, voluntary society membership and so on, culled from various sets of early nineteenth-century sources such as poll books and trade directories. These were the results of his nominal record linkage project, appropriately supported by the then Social Science Research Council. I could not make much sense of the computer sheets or what the figures told us about the middle class; the data was provided without anything more than a cursory note or larger explanation of what it all might mean. At this stage, Dr Morris’ methods were opaque to me. But over the years that followed, I gradually came to understand and admire Bob’s highly innovative approach to the historical study of class.

## Class and class consciousness

Class was everywhere in the 1970s, above all in British social history. After the publication of E.P. Thompson's pathbreaking *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963, the decade that followed saw the emergence of a slew of histories organized around class: Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (1969), R.S. Neale, *Class and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century* (1972), Patricia Hollis, *Class and Class Conflict in Nineteenth-Century England* (1973), John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (1974) to name only the better known. As the titles suggest, the literature of class concentrated on Britain (or more usually England) and the nineteenth century, the classic era of industrialization and urbanization. In these respects, it reflected the wider field of British history in the seventies. In the decade or so after its launch in 1968, Longman's influential Studies in Economic and Social History series published some 31 titles, of which 26 were about British history and over half (17) were focused on the period 1750–1900.<sup>1</sup>

Bob Morris' second book, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution, 1780–1850*, was published in the Longman series in 1979; he was 36.<sup>2</sup> Following the series guidelines, it was an attempt to provide an overview of debates in the historiography; authors were encouraged to avoid 'taking a strongly partisan line' without 'suppressing their own critical faculties'.<sup>3</sup> There was enough scope here to write more than a survey and Bob took the opportunity to carve out a distinctive line in relation to the existing debate about class and British industrialization, dominated as it then was by the often heated exchanges between champions of Marxism (of different strands) and their opponents. Much of the book was given over to detailed discussion of the formation of classes and the character of class conflict as these were manifested in the politics and industrial relations of the first half of the nineteenth century, from parliamentary reform to trade unionism and Chartism. 'The history of class', Bob Morris pronounced, 'must be the history of the actual and concrete, and not just abstractions and theories.'<sup>4</sup> If Bob preferred to distance himself from the explicitly theoretical, he nevertheless displayed a consistent interest in what might be termed the conceptual – that is to say, in ideas and approaches that could be mined from texts that were primarily sociological, political or philosophical but made to serve historical investigation. Thus, he argued that 'the writings of Marx should be approached as a massive workbench for social history rather than as a contentious document of political philosophy'.<sup>5</sup> From Marx, he took the understanding that politics and 'social consciousness' are dependent on the forces and relations of production and that in urban terms a service-based economy such as that of early nineteenth-century Edinburgh would give rise to a very different kind of society from a manufacturing centre like Leeds or Manchester at the same period.<sup>6</sup> From the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci he borrowed the concepts of hegemony and

<sup>1</sup> Figures collated from the front pages of the 1982 edition of R.J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution, 1780–1850*, first published in this series in 1979.

<sup>2</sup> His first book was *Cholera 1832: The Social Response to an Epidemic* (London, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> T.C. Smout, 'Editor's preface', in Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of this point, see R.J. Morris, 'Introduction', in Morris (ed.), *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth-Century Towns* (Leicester, 1986), 1–22.

'spontaneous consent', not as theoretical givens but as tools with which to evaluate relationships between middle-class and artisan cultures and their contribution to the 'social peace' of the 1850s.<sup>7</sup>

Marxism would remain an important component of Bob Morris' thinking about class in history. But the real innovation of *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution* was left to the final chapter where he proposed the sociologist Max Weber as offering 'an alternative system by which historians can organize the information they have about class relationships in the past', adding 'it is a pity they have been so little used by historians'.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Weber meant Bob could identify a specific intellectual position in the existing debate, which was often fierce and polarized. It enabled him to maintain the emphasis on the primacy of economic class defined by the position an individual or group held in the labour market and by the ownership or absence of property. But by conjoining market situation with social status, defined as common lifestyle, and party, the ability to mobilize in pursuit of power, Weber provided a flexible and fine-tuned way of analysing the workings of class in historical reality. Status, for example, helped explain the powerful claims of respectability across economic classes and its different connotations among social groups: working-class respectability implied independence from charitable giving and other forms of middle-class authority, while for white-collar workers, like clerks, it might signal a social distance from the conditions and attitudes of manual workers. A broad, generic sense of 'party' was likewise useful in understanding how groups organized themselves in urban public life, not simply in the sense of political parties but also social movements and voluntary associations. Weber's triumvirate of class, status and party would become the essential framework for the way Bob thought about class for the rest of his life. While many historians could be labelled neo-Marxist, Bob was one of the very few who could justifiably be called neo-Weberian.

### Class, sect and party

It was 11 years before Bob's next book appeared.<sup>9</sup> When it did, *Class, Sect and Party. The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820–1850* (1990) would be the culmination of the previous two decades of research, from walks around Woodhouse with Maurice Beresford inspecting the mansions of Leeds' Victorian well-to-do, to the data printouts I had been sent in 1983 – different modes, one could say, of searching for the bourgeoisie. The book's very title betrayed its Weberian framing and thus the continuities with ideas spelled out in the final chapter of *Class and Class Consciousness*. As a micro-study of the 'making of the middle class' in a single location, Leeds, and specifically the making of a bourgeois public life, *Class, Sect and Party* remains unrivalled; it is the most systematic, detailed study of the social formation of the British middle class yet written.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness*, 58–61.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>9</sup>R.J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party. The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820–1850* (Manchester, 1990).

<sup>10</sup>Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's majestic *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987) had already been published to widespread acclaim by the time Bob's *Class, Sect and Party* appeared, and was of course centrally concerned with gender relations and their connection to public and private spheres. By contrast, *Class, Sect and Party* was about the public and predominantly

In the introduction, Bob indicated that his early idea had been to reconstruct the worldview of the Leeds middle classes by examining their cultural products: paintings, writings and so on. But this quickly proved impossible, partly due to lack of sources but more important, because the middle class itself proved more slippery and fractured than envisaged. Elusiveness was already inscribed in the problem of definition that had haunted the historiography, what Morris memorably referred to as ‘the glorious confusion of the concepts of middle class, middle classes, bourgeoisie, elite, industrial leaders and provincial’, each of which carried distinctive meanings.<sup>11</sup> In the picture he presents, the early nineteenth-century Leeds’ middle classes might have shared a stake in property but they were divided in almost every other way: by wealth and status, shopkeepers a social world away from the large merchants and manufacturers; by religion, nonconformist sects pitted against the Church of England; by politics, Whigs or Liberals and Tories vying for control of urban government with vocal elements of the shopocracy.<sup>12</sup> If this was so, what enabled the urban middle class in towns like Leeds to function as a class in the public arena? How could it appear as a class in the first place?

Bob’s answer to these questions was simple but ingenious. It was the increasingly dense network of voluntary associations – charities, religious missions, improvement societies, cultural institutions like the Lit and Phil, developed from the 1780s onwards, that enabled men of property, deeply divided in other respects, to work together. The network of voluntary societies had both an integrative effect on the disparate ranks of the middle classes, to create a bourgeois ‘civil society’, while simultaneously enabling property holders as a group to impose a regulatory order on cities like Leeds. At the same time, the middle class itself remained a fluid and hierarchical structure, not so much a dynamic industrial bourgeoisie on Marx’s line as an ‘elite-led class’ in which the elite was composed of merchants and professionals rather than manufacturers, the ‘new men’ of the early Victorian imaginary.<sup>13</sup> ‘This elite was building, asserting, creating and re-creating authority over a middle class which was divided by status, party and sectarianism’.<sup>14</sup> Within this middle class, Bob regularly reminded us, individuals might be weak but collectively they were strong. The picture that emerged from the study was of a class firmly rooted in the urban locale (this would change, of course, in the later nineteenth century) and by no means subordinate, culturally or politically, to traditional landed power. ‘The aristocracy retained their titles, and often their seats in parliament and cabinet. But increasingly they danced to the tune of an organized, hierarchical, responsible, family-based, property-owning middle class.’<sup>15</sup>

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masculine world of the middle class. The only other rival to Morris at the time was Theodore Koditschek’s massive *Class Formation and Urban Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1990) but this was a more narrowly Marxian study.

<sup>11</sup>Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*, 10.

<sup>12</sup>Recognition of the internal divisions of the middle class was not new, of course, at Morris’ time of writing. It had already been exposed in the accounts of Victorian local government by Derek Fraser and E.P. Hennock among others, published in the 1970s.

<sup>13</sup>This point is argued most explicitly in chapter 13 of Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 331.

## Structure and culture

*Class, Sect and Party* was not perfect; even by the standards of the day it neglected gender and empire, subjects that would be extensively treated by Bob's contemporary and fellow student of the middle class, Catherine Hall.<sup>16</sup> To be fair, his next book, *Men, Women and Property* would go a long way towards remedying the former absence – as the title suggested – if not the latter.<sup>17</sup> Notable also was the fact that *Class, Sect and Party* overlooked – or perhaps neatly sidestepped – the debates that followed on the publication of Gareth Stedman Jones' *Languages of Class* (1983) and which would usher in successively the linguistic and cultural turns of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Grounded as he was in the social science history of a previous generation, Bob was not for turning.

No doubt conscious of these shifts, however, he attempted a further refinement of his position in a contribution to *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* (2000). Entitled 'Structure, culture and society in British towns', the essay sought to marry Bob's attachment to social structure as an explanatory framework with his long-held interest in cultural production, especially photography and the visual arts.<sup>19</sup> Culture mattered because culture is a matter of meanings and 'meanings have agency. They promote individual actions. They are the basis on which identities are created and mobilized.' But structures are important 'because of their place in explanation'. They 'set broad limits within which human agency could act and react'.

The attention given to structure derives from the feeling that it matters if a town depends on wage labour working in large units of production, rather than casual labour on uncertain and low wages. This attention derived from the belief that social relationships were influenced by the fact that a town derived its income from the pensions and rentier incomes of retired males or unmarried females rather than from an elite of merchants and manufacturers employing wage labour. These structures were related to different social situations.<sup>20</sup>

Towns and cities were important because 'the urban place was the site where the processes that link structure and culture were interacting in the clearest and strongest ways'.<sup>21</sup> Bob's essay then shows through a multiplicity of case-studies how these interactions operated in urban Britain across the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries: the alternations of sharp conflict and social reconciliation in industrial relations in Lancashire, the articulation of radical and sectarian politics in Glasgow, the gradual usurpation of employer dominance and the growth of working-

<sup>16</sup>See *inter alia* Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class* (Cambridge, 1992); *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>17</sup>R.J. Morris, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780–1870: A Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Class* (Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>18</sup>These were debates about the significance of language and of linguistic analysis in historical interpretation, including the idea of history as narrative. For a guide, see Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London, 2001), especially the essays in parts 5 and 6.

<sup>19</sup>See R.J. Morris, 'Middle-class culture, 1700–1914', in Derek Fraser (ed.), *A History of Modern Leeds* (Manchester, 1980), 200–22; R.J. Morris, *Scotland 1907: The Many Scotlands of Valentines and Sons, Photographers* (Edinburgh, 2007).

<sup>20</sup>R.J. Morris, 'Structure, culture and society in British towns', in M.J. Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. III: 1840–1950 (Cambridge, 2000), 397–8.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 398.

class identification with the urban place between the two world wars, the delicate interplay of the local and the national in spheres such as football and the newspaper press.

Class is not uppermost in this account, but its spectre is immanent in the concept of social structure that runs through the essay, whether discussing civil society in Edinburgh or Motherwell, in Luton or Banbury. Class was unavoidable not only because it structured much of social inequality but also because it permeated the contemporary language of social description between 1840 and 1950, whether in regard to church and chapel, housing or the workplace. It has to be said that the connection between structure and culture in Bob's chapter is not formulated with the elegance or originality shown in interpreting middle-class formation in his earlier work. He clearly understood social structure and culture to be closely related in some fashion, each shaping and feeding back on the other, but there is an almost functionalist circularity to the way that interaction is described in the chapter. Nevertheless, his approach allows for an impressively wide comparative overview of civil society in British towns, with all the singularities of place and time, over a century and more. And it enables us not simply to observe the similarities and differences between urban places, but to go some way towards explaining them, to see how and why particular urban social formations took shape.

## Conclusion

Bob Morris is remembered for many things in his writings, perhaps most of all for his study of voluntary societies and their place in the creation of civil society. But I would argue that Bob's most important work, over the long term, was his study of class, especially the British middle class. Re-reading *Class, Sect and Party. The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds 1820–1850* there is hardly a sentence that is not rooted in a rich undergrowth of research undertaken over many years. No one knew more about the complexities of Britain's middle class in the nineteenth century, about the modes of capitalism which produced and sustained it, and the forms to which that class gave rise, including of course the network of voluntary societies. By the time he wrote the book, Bob understood very well that class was only one possible outcome of economic and social processes: the task was to show on what basis class formation happened historically. In the case of Leeds, the elite-led (he might also have said elite-produced) middle class he depicted was very different from the industrial bourgeoisie of Marx's imaginings. Little surprise too that the enormous body of detailed data on nineteenth-century Leeds on which *Class, Sect and Party* rested would also generate, some 17 years later, a second book on family strategies among the same population, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780–1870*.

Over the years, Bob's view of class shifted somewhat. He became more attentive to culture as well as social structure and more open to class as just one option among several in social structure and group formation. Class was not an inevitable way of understanding social relationships but one that was available to make sense of those relationships by actors at the time as well as by later historians. History for Bob was always a dialogue between past and present. But underlying all Bob's work as an urban social historian, there was a remarkable consistency of vision. It was a vision grounded in a Weberian view of the social world, in which material factors, including forms of ownership and market situation, had a determinant influence both on urban

culture and civil society. While politics and culture might have shaped the form historical events took, economic structures and processes represented their conditions of possibility – the possibility, for instance, of strikes, politics and voluntary action. Bob never wavered from a social scientific approach to the past. The purpose of the historian was not primarily to tell a story or construct a narrative but to explain things. Towns and cities were important because they represented the spatial frame in which events, institutions and structures had their existence. Class was not a given, not simply a description to be wheeled out in the form of ‘working-class identity’ or ‘middle-class interest’ but an historical formation that required proper explanation. When class formation and the constitution of the social come back into play as objects of serious historical research, Bob Morris’ work will be an inspiration for a new generation of historians. It should also be seen as a major achievement in its own right.

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