

**Popular Political Continuity in Urban England,
1867-1918: The Case Studies of Bristol and
Northampton**

Matthew Kidd

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Abstract

This thesis examines the transition between working-class radicalism and labour politics in two provincial English constituencies, Bristol and Northampton, between 1867 and 1918. By combining local case studies with a textual analysis of empirical material and a conceptual approach to ideology, it offers fresh insights into popular political change in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain.

Its central argument is that, contrary to the prevailing historiography on labour politics and identity, a distinctive sense of class could shape working-class radical and labour strategies, languages, identities, and ideologies continuously between 1867 and 1918. In particular, it demonstrates that before the mid-1880s, working-class radical activists in Bristol and Northampton exhibited a non-adversarial sense of class that shaped their perceptions of the social order, their interpretations of radical ideology, and their relationships with both mainstream liberals and middle-class radicals.

It also suggests that while working-class radicals came to use 'labour' to describe themselves and their organisations from the mid-1880s, this was primarily a rhetorical move rather than one reflecting a substantive change in their political identity. Over the next thirty years, labour activists in both Bristol and Northampton remained fiercely committed to the dominant strategy, the non-conflictual conception of class, and the political ideology that had long shaped local working-class radical traditions. In these constituencies, the Victorian tradition of working-class radicalism left an indelible mark on twentieth-century labour politics.

This study has important implications for our understanding of political and ideological change in modern Britain. Firstly, confirming the existence of a decidedly *working-class* radical movement makes it easier to understand the rise of a class-based labour politics in late Victorian Britain without having to account for either discontinuities in popular politics or the re-emergence of a dormant class consciousness within the British working class. Secondly, establishing a line of continuity between working-class radicalism and later labour politics helps us to explain some of the tensions that characterised progressive politics in the Edwardian

era. Finally, seeing working-class radicalism as a distinctive ideology with its own conceptual framework enriches our understanding of non-liberal progressive thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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List of Abbreviations

Archives

BL	British Library, London
BRO	Bristol Record Office, Bristol
LHA	Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester
MRC	Modern Records Centre, Warwick
NCL	Northamptonshire Central Library, Northampton
NRO	Northamptonshire Record Office, Northampton

Collections

GRC	British Library General Reference Collection
JG	John Gregory Papers, University of Bristol
LSECOOKE	Arthur Cooke Papers, LSE
LSEILP	ILP papers, LSE
UBSC	University of Bristol Special Collections, Bristol

Newspapers

BF	<i>Bristol Forward</i>
BG	<i>Bristol Guardian</i>
BLH	<i>Bristol Labour Herald</i>
BM	<i>Bristol Mercury</i>
BO	<i>Bristol Observer</i>
BT&M	<i>Bristol Times & Mirror</i>
BWM	<i>Bristol Weekly Mercury</i>
NDE	<i>Northampton Daily Echo</i>
NI	<i>Northampton Independent</i>
NM	<i>Northampton Mercury</i>
NS	<i>Northampton Socialist</i>
RN	<i>Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper</i>
SP	<i>Socialist Pioneer</i>

WDP *Western Daily Press*

Organisations

BILP	Bristol ILP
BLEA	Bristol Labour Electoral Association
BLRC	Bristol Labour Representation Committee
BLA	Bristol Liberal Association
BMA	Bristol Miners' Association
BSS	Bristol Socialist Society
BSP	British Socialist Party
BTC	Bristol Trades' Council
DWR	Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers' Union
GWGL	National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers
ILP	Independent Labour Party
LRU	Northampton Liberal and Radical Union
NLRC	Northampton Labour Representation Council
NTC	Northampton Trades' Council
NUBSO	National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives
NUBSRF	National Union of Operative Boot and Shoe Rivetters and Finishers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
OLA	Operative Liberals' Association
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SDP	Social Democratic Party
WMRA	Working Men's Reform Association

Sources

AR	Annual Report
CR	Conference Report
MR	Monthly Report
M	Minutes

Other

For clarity, this study uses the term 'shoemaker' to cover the various categories of worker in the boot and shoe trade. It also uses shortened names for trade unions with potentially confusing abbreviations, such as the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers' Union. For example, it uses 'Dockers' Union' rather than DWRGWU. Finally, it uses Labour with a capital 'L' to designate labour organisations, and labour with a lower case 'l' to designate the labour movement or labourist ideology. This also applies to other organisations, movements, and ideologies considered in this study.

1: Introduction

This thesis examines the transition between working-class radicalism and labour politics in two provincial English constituencies, Bristol and Northampton, between 1867 and 1918. Combining local studies with a textual analysis of empirical material and a conceptual approach to ideology, it offers fresh insights into popular political change in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. Its central argument is that, contrary to the prevailing historiography on labour politics and identity, a distinctive sense of class could shape working-class radical and labour strategies, languages, identities, and ideologies continuously between 1867 and 1918. In particular, it demonstrates that, before the mid-1880s, working-class radical activists in Bristol and Northampton exhibited a non-adversarial sense of class that shaped their perceptions of the social order, their interpretations of radical ideology, and their relationships with both mainstream liberals and middle-class radicals. It also suggests that while working-class radicals in these constituencies came to use 'labour' to describe themselves and their organisations from the mid-1880s, this was primarily a rhetorical move rather than one reflecting a substantive change in their political identity. Over the next thirty years, labour activists in both Bristol and Northampton remained fiercely committed to the dominant strategy, the non-conflictual conception of class, and the political ideology that had long shaped local working-class radical traditions. In Bristol and Northampton, the Victorian tradition of working-class radicalism left an indelible mark on twentieth-century Labour politics.

Seeing working-class radicalism as a culturally and ideologically unique movement has three important implications for our understanding of political and ideological change in modern Britain. Firstly, it makes it easier to understand the rise of a class-based labour politics in late Victorian Britain without having to account for either discontinuities in popular politics or the re-emergence of a dormant class consciousness within the British working class. Secondly, establishing a line of continuity between the working-class radical tradition and later labour politics helps us to explain some of the tensions within progressive politics in the Edwardian era. Finally, seeing working-class radicalism as a distinctive ideology with its own conceptual framework enriches our understanding of non-liberal progressive thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Related historical

questions, such as the role of class in political life, the broad themes of continuity and change, and the relationship between material factors and political developments, have all received considerable attention from historians over the past fifty years and have often led to intense historiographical debates. Due to the scope and complexity of these debates, a necessary first step is to discuss three dominant perspectives on these historical questions - traditional, liberal revisionist, and non-liberal revisionist - in some depth. Having established this context, the introduction will enumerate how this thesis departs from these traditions in both argument and methodology.

1.1 Historiography

1.1.1 Traditional and Liberal Revisionist Perspectives

The following two examples offer an apt opening for any discussion about class and its relationship to popular politics in Britain between 1867 and 1918. At the 1868 general election, the radical activist Charles Bradlaugh contested the seat of Lord Henley, the junior Liberal MP for Northampton. At his election meetings, Bradlaugh told his listeners that he had a right to represent working men because he had lived in the midst of them and had felt 'the biting grip of their wants'.¹ He had come to Northampton, he claimed, with the backing of the men of Lancashire, the men of Yorkshire, and the men of the mines, and with a strong desire to fight the 'working man's battle'.² Almost exactly fifty years later, in November 1918, Northampton was once again in the midst of an election contest. This time, the sitting Liberal MP faced a challenge from the relatively young Labour party and its candidate, Walter Halls. Like Bradlaugh, Halls couched his political appeals in an unambiguous language of class. During the campaign he told the town's voters that he had 'always fought hardest for his class' and denied that he had ever had a first-class railway fare. Furthermore, he claimed to know what poverty was and expressed his belief that he could look after the wants of the 'working people' better than his opponent, who had been 'born with a silver spoon in his mouth'.³

When considered together, these instances do not fit easily into the traditional or liberal revisionist interpretations of post-1867 popular politics.⁴ The resemblance between Halls' political rhetoric in 1918 and Bradlaugh's from 1867

¹ *NM*, 18 July 1868.

² *NM*, 21 November 1868.

³ *NDE*, 2 December 1918; 4 December 1918; 5 December 1918; 6 December 1918.

⁴ For a critical summary of these traditions, see the first chapter of J. Host, *Victorian Labour History: Experience, Identity and the Politics of Representation* (London, 1998).

challenges the traditional 'three-stage' interpretation of the long nineteenth century.⁵ In this view, the first period between 1780 and 1850 witnessed the deepening of class consciousness and growth in militancy amongst the British working class that culminated in the radical and class-based movement of Chartism. The defeat of this movement represented the opening of a second and far less dramatic phase in popular political history in which fragmentation, cross-class political alliances, and reformist outlooks within the working class all contributed to the 'unmaking' of the class consciousness that had developed during the Chartist years. It was not until the mid-1880s that this class finally awoke from their '40 years winter sleep'.⁶ This third period opened with the revival of socialism, the rapid growth and militancy of new unskilled trade unions, and the emergence of independent labour politics, which all represented a decisive shift away from the passive and moderate tone of working-class activity in the previous period. When seen in this light, the national Labour party, formed as the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, represented little more than the political expression of a resurgent class consciousness amongst the more assertive working-class community.

This stage-based interpretation places a great deal of emphasis upon popular political discontinuity. For proponents of this model, these changes were primarily the products of deeper socio-economic and material factors.⁷ The first or 'making' phase of working-class development coincided with what Neville Kirk has described as the 'economic disruption attendant upon the accelerated growth of industrial capitalism'. The second stage, the 'unmaking', emerged from the economic expansion of the mid-Victorian period, which allowed employers and the state to make a number of concessions and accommodations.⁸ Scholars in this tradition have also pointed to material changes to explain the revival of socialism, the birth of New

⁵ For examples of this model, see N. Kirk, *Change, continuity and class: Labour in British society, 1850-1920* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 5-8; For examples of the three-stage model, see S. Webb and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666-1920* (London, 1920), pp. 362; 366; 369; 374; 375; 387; G. D. H. Cole, *British Working Class Politics, 1832-1914* (London, 1965), 9; R. Harrison, *Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics, 1861-1881* (London, 1965), p. 3; H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Middlesex, 1971), p. 89; C. Chamberlain, 'The Growth of Support for the Labour Party in Britain', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 24/4 (1973), p. 481; E. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further studies in the history of labour* (London, 1984), pp. 156-157; 182; 196; 200; 207; 211; E. Hobsbawm, 'The 'New Unionism' Reconsidered' in W. Mommsen and H. Husung (eds.), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914* (London, 1985), pp. 15-17.

⁶ Frederik Engels quoted in M. Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832-1914* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 63.

⁷ For example, G. D. H. Cole argued the forces of the political labour movement were 'basically economic; they arose out of the changing forms of industrial life, and the changing class-structure in which successive phases of economic organization worked themselves out'. See Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 7.

⁸ Kirk, *Change, continuity and class*, pp. 6-7.

Unionism, and the flowering of independent labour politics in the 1880s and 1890s. In particular, they have argued that this period witnessed the beginning of a process of homogenisation during which the formerly fragmented working class became increasingly segregated, both culturally and politically, from other classes in society.⁹ For these scholars, the increase in class feeling during this period and the rise of class politics more generally explains why a trade union-dominated and class-based Labour party came to replace the cross-class Liberal party as the dominant force in British progressive politics.¹⁰

Over the last thirty years, this traditional interpretation has come under a sustained attack from a diverse range of historians influenced by the 'linguistic turn'.¹¹ This approach, which has questioned the extent to which politics can be seen as an outcome of socio-material factors, has encouraged further interest in the ideas and beliefs contained within the verbal and written discourse of historical participants.¹² Indeed, for Gareth Stedman Jones, language was constitutive of social reality, not merely reflective.¹³ It was not the 'verbalisation of perception' or simply a medium through which class consciousness or experience finds an expression.¹⁴ Instead, for Stedman Jones and other advocates of the linguistic turn, what matters is not so much social and structural change but 'which of these changes are articulated and how'.¹⁵ In practical terms, this approach involves exploring the relationship between terms and propositions within the political discourse of leaders, activists, and 'ordinary' people. For example, by applying this approach to

⁹ For examples, see Kirk, *Change, continuity and class*, pp. 8; 151; 156; 196; F. Reid, 'Keir Hardie's Conversion to Socialism', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923* (London, 1971), pp. 17-46; K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour, 1890-1918* (London, 1984), p. 28; D. Nicholls, 'The English Middle Class and the Ideological Significance of Radicalism, 1760-1886', *Journal of British Studies*, 24/4 (1985), pp. 415-433; Chamberlain, 'The Growth of Support for the Labour Party in Britain', p. 481; M. Childs, 'Labour Grows Up: The Electoral System, Political Generations, and British Politics 1890-1929', *Twentieth Century British History*, 6/2 (1995), p. 142. R. Price, 'The New Unionism and the Labour Process' in W. Mommsen and H. Husung (eds.), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914* (London, 1985), p. 137.

¹⁰ R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 243-244. G. D. H. Cole also argued that liberalism 'had no answer to the basic problems of the new industrialism of the twentieth century'. See Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 9.

¹¹ M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars* (London, 2005), p. 5.

¹² L. Black, 'What kind of people are you?' Labour, the people and the 'new political history', in J. Callaghan, S. Fielding and S. Ludlam (eds.), *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour politics and history* (Manchester, 2003), p. 25.

¹³ G. Stedman Jones, 'The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s', *History Workshop Journal*, 42 (1996), pp. 20; 27.

¹⁴ J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the people: Party, language and popular politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 102.

¹⁵ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of class: Studies in English working class history, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 23.

the question of Chartism, Stedman Jones argued that the rise and fall of the Chartist movement was not based upon economic developments, internal divisions, or an immature class consciousness. Rather, it was conditional upon the Chartist movement's 'capacity to persuade its constituency to interpret their distress or discontent within the terms of its political language'. To answer questions of this nature, proponents of the linguistic turn insisted that historians pay attention to what people said, how they said it, and how they addressed each other and their opponents.¹⁶

Stedman Jones's work influenced a number of subsequent studies of nineteenth-century popular politics. Although proponents of this approach differ in a number of regards, their work collectively has challenged two fundamental components of the traditional interpretation. Firstly, it has downplayed the extent to which socio-economic factors determined political changes and developments.¹⁷ In his extensive study of the early Labour party, Duncan Tanner convincingly demonstrated that the party's rise was not based upon the growth of class consciousness, but was due rather to the party's ability to present practical and relevant ideas to its audience.¹⁸ For Tanner, it was not only social factors, such as the economic interests of a particular constituency, which determined political action and electoral behaviour. Instead, he argued that this action and behaviour would best be examined by focusing on the two-way relationship between social and political factors, including the party's ideology.¹⁹ To some extent, this approach has characterised other work that could be described as revisionist, including the collection of essays edited by Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid in 1991. In *Currents of Radicalism*, Biagini and Reid argued that purely social explanations for political change would always be inadequate because the dynamics of popular politics largely depends on the success of the appeals emanating from rival political parties.²⁰ Similarly, Jon Lawrence's work on the promotion and the reception of political messages has encouraged historians to recognise the active rather than passive role

¹⁶ Stedman Jones, *Languages of class*, pp. 21; 94; 96.

¹⁷ A. Reid, 'The Division of Labour and Politics in Britain, 1880-1920', in W. Mommsen and H. Husung (eds.), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914* (London, 1985), pp. 150; 154. See also D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 1998), p. 115.

¹⁸ D. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 442. See also D. Tanner, 'Class voting and radical politics: the Liberal and Labour parties, 1910-31' in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 106.

¹⁹ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 12.

²⁰ E. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 15.

that political parties could play not only in interpreting wider change through their political language, but also in influencing it through their policies.²¹

Secondly, as well as separating the formerly rigid link between material factors and political change, revisionists have questioned the traditionalist three-stage model by placing greater emphasis on continuities within popular politics. In particular, they have flattened out the chronological terrain of popular politics by revealing substantial continuities between the mid-Victorian popular radical tradition and progressive politics in the early twentieth century.²² For these scholars, the emergence of independent labour politics in the 1880s and 1890s represented neither a significant new departure in popular politics nor the beginning of a distinctive phase in Britain's political development. As Biagini and Reid argued, the central demands of twentieth-century progressive politics, whether liberal or labour, remained largely those of nineteenth-century radical liberalism. They suggested that the early Labour party remained committed to older radical values and traditions such as the demand for open government and the rule of law, individual liberty, democracy, and freedom from intervention at both home and abroad. When seen in these terms, the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 was merely a 'dynamic recomposition' of nineteenth-century popular radicalism in response to a new political environment.²³

In contrast to the class-based focus of traditional accounts, scholars that could be described as liberal revisionist, including both Biagini and Reid, have argued that this popular variant of radicalism was inter-class in nature. For Biagini, the movement was composed of a diverse combination of artisans, small tradesmen, and organised workers who considered themselves to be the 'the people' rather than a class.²⁴ The essays collected in *Currents of Radicalism* offered a number of examples to support this view. Rohan McWilliam used working-class involvement in the Tichborne case, in which an Australian butcher claimed to be the long-lost aristocrat Sir Roger Tichborne, as evidence of the radical movement's concern for class-neutral

²¹ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 267; J. Lawrence, 'Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914', *The English Historical Review*, 108/428 (1993), p. 631; J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 18.

²² Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, p. 7.

²³ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, pp. 5; 10; A. Reid, 'Old Unionism reconsidered: the radicalism of Robert Knight, 1870-1900', in E. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 243.

²⁴ E. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 11; 51.

causes.²⁵ John Shepherd demonstrated how Lib-Lab MPs embraced the Gladstonian vision of different social classes working in a common political culture for a shared set of interests.²⁶ In a separate work, Patrick Joyce downplayed the significance of class-inflected statements within popular political discourse at this time and claimed that the emphasis was on inclusion rather than antagonism. After all, as Joyce argued, popular radicals tended to use broad terms such as 'rich' and 'poor' and the 'masses' and the 'classes' to express social distinctions rather than more exclusivist class designations.²⁷ The narrative of continuity as constructed by liberal revisionists thus placed a great deal of emphasis upon a 'popular' or 'plebeian', rather than 'artisan' or 'working-class', radical movement, which was composed of and appealed to members of all social classes.²⁸

This basic overview has outlined some of the major differences between the traditional and liberal revisionist approaches. To summarise, proponents of the former have suggested that uneven trends in class consciousness during the long nineteenth century, which emerged from changing socio-economic contexts, resulted in three discernible stages of working-class development. On the other hand, by downplaying the importance of both class consciousness and material factors and by placing more emphasis on 'the political', liberal revisionist scholars have offered a non class-based narrative of continuity. There seems little space in either approach, then, for the examples presented at the beginning of this section. The apparent discursive continuity between the mid-Victorian radicalism of Bradlaugh and the twentieth-century labourism of Halls does not correspond with the discontinuous chronology offered by traditional scholars. At the same time, the strong emphasis on class that characterised the candidates' appeals does not appear to be compatible with the arguments put forward by liberal revisionists, who have stressed the inclusive and non class-based tone of both radical and labour politics. To clarify the position of this study within the existing historiography, it is now

²⁵ R. McWilliam, 'Radicalism and popular culture: the Tichborne case and the politics of 'fair play', 1867-1886', in E. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 44-64.

²⁶ J. Shepherd, 'Labour and parliament: the Lib.-Labs. as the first working-class MPs, 1885-1906', in E. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 198.

²⁷ P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the question of class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 8; 13; 34; 79. See also J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A study in the English political culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 297.

²⁸ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 4; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, p. 11.

necessary to highlight some of problems in the traditions described so far, and, more specifically, their contrasting conceptions of class and class consciousness.

1.1.2 Populism and Liberal Revisionism

The case studies of Bristol and Northampton advance many of the arguments made by liberal revisionists against the traditional approach. First, they suggest that popular political developments between 1867 and 1918 were not necessarily conditional upon the shifting strengths and weaknesses of class consciousness among British workers. As in many other urban constituencies throughout Britain, Labour parties emerged in Bristol and Northampton before 1918.²⁹ Yet the fortunes of these organisations, far from fitting neatly into any teleological and deterministic framework, were largely conditional upon local and national *political* factors. In Bristol, independent labour politics emerged out of working-class activists' sense of disillusionment with the perceived unrepresentative nature of the local Liberal party and, in particular, with the hostility of its leaders to the question of labour representation.³⁰ In contrast, the Liberal party in Northampton was far more amenable to demands for labour representation, which consequently delayed the emergence of a united Labour party in the town until 1914. Moreover, in both constituencies, there was little correlation between periods of industrial unrest and an improved electoral performance of either labour or socialist organisations.³¹ With this in mind, it becomes extremely difficult to assign any deterministic role to social and economic factors in Bristol and Northampton.

Second, this study advances the liberal revisionist challenge to the traditionalist three-stage or discontinuity model of popular political development. Its central argument is that the emergence during the 1880s of a self-described 'labour' politics in Bristol and Northampton did not represent a major discontinuity in local popular politics. Far from breaking with local political traditions, the pioneers of labour politics in these areas demonstrated a strong commitment to the strategies, the guiding principles, and the core ideological beliefs of their working-class radical predecessors. They used a similar political vocabulary and placed a strong emphasis

²⁹ One hundred and fifty eight local cells of the Labour party existed throughout Britain in 1913. By 1919, this had risen to four hundred. See McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, pp. 21; 137.

³⁰ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 291; H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), p. 105. For evidence of similar frustrations elsewhere, see Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 30; D. Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 181; 232; D. Clark, *Colne Valley, Radicalism to Socialism: The portrait of a Northern constituency in the formative years of the Labour Party 1890-1910* (London, 1981), pp. 2; 15.

³¹ See Appendix.

upon the older radical notions of 'justice', 'tyranny' and 'fair play'. They continued to articulate a conception of class and class relations that acknowledged class distinctions but rejected class antagonism.³² They also retained a sense of loyalty to the core concepts that had underpinned working-class radical ideology. Before the 1880s, working-class radicals had not lacked 'any clear ideological basis', as Royden Harrison suggested, but had offered a consistent ideological vision and a coherent political programme that demanded, amongst other things, the expansion of democracy, the class rebalancing of representation on political bodies, and the protection and extension of political and industrial rights and liberties.³³ Labour activists in Bristol and Northampton, while adding new elements to these programmes, did not abandon the ideological framework upon which they had been based.

The liberal revisionist challenge has provided a convincing and valuable corrective to traditional accounts that had tended to assume that class consciousness was largely determined by material factors and that had emphasised the themes of discontinuity. This study, though, suggests that by largely rejecting a class-led narrative of popular political history, many liberal revisionist accounts, including Patrick Joyce's *Visions of the People*, have tended to downplay or even ignore class-based tensions within it.³⁴ For Joyce, popular politics between 1840 and 1914 was primarily concerned with 'the people' rather than with the working class. While not denying class distinctions, he suggests that behind these stood more powerful social identities.³⁵ Joyce proposes 'populism' as a more appropriate description than class because it connoted inclusiveness, extra-economic categorisation, reconciliation, and fellowship, all of which, he argues, were more prevalent within popular discourse at this time.³⁶ While this search for non-class identities was and remains an important exercise, it led to the emergence in *Visions of the People* of an unnecessary, confusing, and perhaps unintentional dichotomy between class and populism. This is because Joyce, as he himself acknowledged, was

³² Trygve Tholfsen identified a similar conception of class amongst radicals in the period before 1867. T. Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976), p. 243.

³³ Harrison, *Before the Socialists*, p. 3.

³⁴ For a similar criticism, see J. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1996), pp. 2-3.

³⁵ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 5; 56; 335. See also Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 297; 310; 326. For accusations that Joyce proclaimed the absence of class, see Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 4. For Joyce's defence, see P. Joyce, 'The Imaginary Discontents of Social History: A Note of Response to Mayfield and Thorne, and Lawrence and Taylor', *Social History* 18/1 (1993), pp. 81-85.

³⁶ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 11.

looking for an adversarial, economic, and socially exclusivist definition of class.³⁷ Very briefly he admits that by focusing on populism he may have been describing a form of class consciousness 'in which class identity (but not class opposition) was strong', but he quickly disregards this idea because class vocabulary during this period had little to do with class in an antagonistic sense.³⁸ After finding class-conflictual sentiments absent from popular discourse, Joyce sought not to interrogate or propose a redefinition of class consciousness as traditional historians understood it, but to find an alternative to class entirely. This is because, for Joyce, applying the label of class to political movements tends to obscure rather than clarify what was actually there.³⁹

This emphasis on the populist tone of progressive politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century forms a major part of the liberal revisionist argument.⁴⁰ But using the term 'populism' to describe the sentiments, values, and ideals of non-liberal progressive movements in Bristol and Northampton would merely serve to obscure the concrete social relations in these constituencies. It would conceal, for instance, the very real tensions that existed not only between radicals and liberals, but also between different sections of the radical movement. In Bristol and Northampton, these tensions primarily revolved around questions relating to class. As a consequence, this study contends that it was a decidedly *working-class* form of radicalism that went on to shape later labour politics in these two constituencies. It demonstrates that those within this political tradition, which was distinct from, and sometimes opposed to, both mainstream liberalism and populist forms of radicalism, embraced a strong sense of class that shaped their political vocabulary and informed their understanding of the environment that they inhabited. They articulated a highly restrictive social identity that was informed by a range of assumptions about gender, nationality, place, and work. In their view, the

³⁷ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 11; 333. Conflict was a central part of E. P. Thompson's definition of class: 'class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs'. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Aylesbury, 1968), pp. 9-10. Emphasis added. For other accounts that emphasize conflict, see R. Price, *Masters, union and men: Work control in building and the rise of labour, 1830-1914* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 5; N. Kirk, 'Class and the 'linguistic turn' in Chartist and post-Chartist historiography' in N. Kirk (ed.), *Social Class and Marxism: Defences and Challenges* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 117. For criticisms of Joyce's definition of class, see M. Savage and A. Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840-1940* (London, 1994), p. 17; Host, *Victorian Labour History*, p. 54.

³⁸ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 334-335. James Vernon also admits that language could 'be endowed with class meanings', but argues that 'it is equally as easy to imagine the extra-class meanings of this language'. Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 311.

³⁹ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 4; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, p. 11.

social order was composed of the working class or 'working classes', who formed the numerically dominant but politically excluded section of the community, and the smaller but more powerful middle-class and upper-class sections.⁴¹ Furthermore, while they often used broad terms and phrases such as 'the people', they tended to give these more exclusivist meanings by interchanging them with narrower terms such as the 'working class' or 'working men'.⁴² For working-class radicals in Bristol and Northampton, 'the workers' were 'the people'.⁴³

This strong sense of class shaped their understanding of working-class radical ideology. At a basic programmatic level, working-class radicals advocated many of the political demands deemed acceptable by radicals of all classes.⁴⁴ In fact, in both Bristol and Northampton, it was the middle-class section of the radical movement that understood their ideology in populist terms, and who justified their demands by evoking the 'trans-class' idea of 'the people' or the 'industrious classes'.⁴⁵ This populist interpretation of radicalism was far less common among working-class radicals, who understood its key ideological concepts in class terms. They associated the concept of democracy with the removal of property qualifications for voting, the payment of MPs, and direct labour representation on local and national governing bodies. They identified the concepts of rights and liberty with the rights of working men, the interests of labour, and the liberty of trade unions. While they offered their loyalty to the existing constitutional order, they sought to realise what they perceived to be its fundamental representative nature by removing the class imbalances in political representation. Middle-class and working-class radicals, despite using a shared political discourse, offered contrasting interpretations of what radicalism truly meant.

Seeing working-class radicalism as a political tradition distinct from both mainstream liberalism and populist forms of radicalism has important ramifications for our understanding of political and ideological change in late nineteenth- and

⁴¹ Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 20; 111; 113-115; 116.

⁴² As Jon Lawrence argued, 'languages of class' could be 'highly gendered'. Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 37. See also K. Hunt, 'Fractured universality: the language of British socialism before the First World War', in J. Belchem and N. Kirk (eds.), *Languages of Labour* (Aldershot, 1997), pp. 65-80.

⁴³ A number of scholars, both traditional and revisionist, have noted how a diverse range of nineteenth-century political actors excluded the middle- and upper-classes from their definition of 'the people'. See Kirk, 'Class and the 'linguistic turn'', p. 100; E. J. Yeo, 'Language and contestation: the case of 'the People', 1832 to present,' in J. Belchem and N. Kirk (eds.), *Languages of Labour* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 48; J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (London, 1993), p. 5; Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 1; Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 310.

early twentieth-century Britain. First, it makes it easier to account for the rise of a class-based labour politics in late Victorian Britain without having to resort to either a stagist model of discontinuity or a populist non-class model of continuity.⁴⁶ While the emergence of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 certainly represented an important organisational development in British political history, locating it as part of a long political tradition in which the concept of class had served as a defining element helps to explain the tone of its early rhetoric. Second, if we acknowledge that working-class radicals were never fully subsumed within either a broad Liberal or a broad Radical coalition, but were rather assertive and semi-independent political agents in their own right, then it becomes easier to understand the nature of liberal/labour relations from the 1880s onwards.⁴⁷ In particular, it goes some way towards explaining why members of the early Labour party, despite expressing sympathy with the broad historical traditions of liberalism and the Liberal party, often acted as critical, frustrated, and troublesome members in the Edwardian Progressive Alliance.⁴⁸ Finally, confirming the survival of working-class radical ideology into the Edwardian era suggests that the discursive, programmatic, and organisational changes in progressive politics before 1914 largely obscured the resilience of older intellectual frameworks. 'Labourism', which became an ideology in its own right in the late Victorian period, was, in its core conceptual architecture, working-class radicalism in an updated form.

This is certainly true in Bristol and Northampton, where working-class radicalism left a decisive mark on later labour politics. In these constituencies, the labour pioneers of the 1880s adopted the linguistic customs, the conceptions of class, and the central ideological concepts that had defined local working-class radical movements. They too gave restrictive meanings to terms such as 'the people' by interchanging them with narrower social definitions such as 'the workers'. They too articulated a highly restrictive definition of the working classes, which tended to marginalise or, in some cases, exclude women workers, agricultural labourers,

⁴⁶ The Labour party was class-based in terms of its composition. In 1900, 93.88% of the party's membership affiliated as trade unionists. In 1914, this had risen to 97.51%. D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 394.

⁴⁷ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 172.

⁴⁸ Anthony Taylor suggests that while this alliance was possible due to the joint culture and the intertwined roots of liberal and labour politics, the Labour party was never simply a 'client in its turn-of-century relationship with the Liberal party'. A. Taylor, *Lords of Misrule: Hostility to Aristocracy in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 121-122.

'undeserving' sections of the unemployed, and foreign workers.⁴⁹ They too remained committed to a class-based image of society that viewed the working classes as the numerically dominant but least politically represented section of society. Furthermore, they too exhibited a class-inflected ideology that, like working-class radicalism, was composed of the core concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights and liberty. In Bristol and Northampton, labour politics essentially represented an evolution within local traditions of working-class radicalism.

1.1.3 Class and Non-Liberal Revisionism

This study challenges the liberal revisionist 'continuity thesis' by reasserting the importance of class within popular politics between 1867 and 1918. As class remains a contested and controversial concept among historians, it is important to clarify the way in which popular political activists constructed and articulated their understanding of this concept.⁵⁰ In Bristol and Northampton, the most frequently articulated conception of class among working-class radical and labour activists was one that acknowledged class distinctions but rejected class conflict.⁵¹ In this view, society was composed of and divided into distinct classes - working, middle and upper - that had their own particular interests. At times, activists used different terms to denote these classes.⁵² Yet, whether they used a three-class or two-class model, working-class radical and labour activists always saw themselves as organic

⁴⁹ For a discussion of gendered conceptions of the working class, see J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999), pp. 53-67. For examples of exclusivist attitudes among male workers towards women, see J. Hannam 'In The Comradeship of the Sexes Lies the Hope of Progress and Social Regeneration': Women in the West Riding ILP, c. 1890-1914' in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), p. 225; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 312-313; C. Hunt, 'Dancing and Days Out: The Role of Social Events in British Women's Trade Unionism in the Early Twentieth Century', *Labour History Review*, 76/2 (2011), p. 108; S. Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement* (London, 1980). For xenophobia and nationalistic sentiments amongst workers, see Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 141; M. Pugh, *Speak For Britain! A New History of the Labour Party* (London, 2010), p. 12; L. Tabili, *"We ask for British Justice": Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (London, 1994), pp. 41-57; 81-112; P. Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woodbridge, 1998); H. Cunningham, 'The language of patriotism' in R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Volume I: History and Politics* (London, 1989), pp. 57-89; L. Barrow, 'White solidarity in 1914' in R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Volume I: History and Politics* (London, 1989), pp. 275-287; S. Auerbach, *Race, Law, and "The Chinese Puzzle" in Imperial Britain* (Basingstoke, 2009). For urban-based workers' attitudes to the unemployed, see Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, p. 112; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 286-288. For labour and socialist attitudes to agricultural labourers, see M. Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the Land: the Response of the Labour Party to the Land Campaign of Lloyd George before the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 8/2 (1997), pp. 134-135.

⁵⁰ In 1998, Rosemary Crompton could still argue that 'much confusion surrounds the term' of 'class'. R. Crompton, *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates* (Oxford, 1998), p. 9. For more on the ambiguities of 'class' perspectives during this period, see Host, *Victorian Labour History*, pp. 96; 101.

⁵¹ Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, p. 115.

⁵² Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 20; 111. For example, when discussing industrial matters, they tended to draw upon a two-class model of society, speaking of, for example, 'capital' and 'labour'.

members of the working classes, and argued that, through their political and industrial activities, they were furthering the interests of their class. At the same time, while they considered the working classes to be numerically dominant, they argued that their class lacked the socio-economic privileges, the educational opportunities, and the political representation afforded to other sections of the community. To remedy the class imbalances that characterised political and industrial life, working-class radical and labour activists favoured trade unionism as a way to ensure that workers received the full value of their labour. They also favoured increased political representation at a local and national level to ensure that the demands of their class received the political attention that they deserved.⁵³ This prioritisation of the working class and its interests went hand in hand with a strong emphasis on the unique virtues and experiences of the worker, or, to be more precise, the male, British, and urban worker.

An emphasis on class distinction, though, was not synonymous with an emphasis on class conflict.⁵⁴ In some respects, this conception of class relations is similar to what Peter Clarke described as 'the social democratic theory of the class struggle'.⁵⁵ For Clarke, while social democrats accepted the class dimension of democracy and worked within 'class parties', they denied the desirability or necessity of class conflict. In Bristol and Northampton, this non-antagonistic understanding of class relations was not merely the preserve of Edwardian social democrats.⁵⁶ Working-class radical and labour activists had distanced themselves from theories that promoted class war, and had frequently denied accusations that they sought to stir up class hatred, long before the turn of the century. They defended their class-centred approach to politics by claiming that it was necessary given the unbalanced nature of political and economic power. Their commitment to class politics emanated from a desire to rebalance the social order, and from a wish to make it

⁵³ W. Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism: Men and Ideas in the Formation of Fabian Socialist Doctrines, 1881-1889* (London, 1975), p. 12.

⁵⁴ Neville Kirk, who has often defended the traditional interpretation, proposed more recently a 'reformulation of the definition of class' that would be more 'open-ended, flexible, and pluralistic'. N. Kirk, 'Decline and Fall, Resilience and Regeneration: A Review Essay on Social Class', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 57 (2000), p. 94.

⁵⁵ P. Clarke, 'The social democratic theory of the class struggle', in J. Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 3-18. See also B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64* (Manchester, 2007), p. 27. Jackson argues that egalitarians wanted to 'foster a community characterised by 'fellowship', in which citizens of equal social standing treated one another with mutual respect, free from 'invidious comparisons of superior and inferior', and fairly shared the fruits of their collective labour'.

⁵⁶ Clarke chiefly associated this theory with the early Fabians and the new Liberals. Clarke, 'The social democratic theory of the class struggle', p. 7.

more representative of society at large, rather than from a desire to overturn it. They extended this attitude to the industrial sphere, where they favoured negotiation over strike action, which they deemed as a necessary weapon but ultimately harmful to all sections of the community. They also tended to focus their anger towards individual and 'tyrannical' employers, and, later, towards employers' organisations, rather than towards the employing class as a whole. Similarly, in the political field, they did not deny the right of other classes to send their own representatives to municipal and parliamentary bodies.⁵⁷ This was, after all, the democratic right of all sections of the community. They simply argued that, through their overrepresentation on local and national governing bodies, other classes held a political influence out of all proportion to their numerical strength. In this sense, class did have a place in popular politics throughout this period, but not in the way that traditional or liberal revisionist scholars have previously understood it.

The work of liberal revisionist scholars, such as Patrick Joyce, stimulated a number of key debates about class, language, and politics in the early 1990s.⁵⁸ Since this time, a more nuanced appreciation of popular politics has emerged amongst scholars who, whilst remaining broadly committed to the 'continuity thesis', have sought to interrogate and bring to light some of the radical-liberal tensions in the post-Chartist era.⁵⁹ These scholars, or non-liberal revisionists, have made two important contributions to the debates about continuity and change in the long nineteenth century. Firstly, their work has added vitality to mid-to-late Victorian radicalism by drawing attention to the movement's continued independence from mainstream liberalism. Anthony Taylor's eclectic range of articles on rights of access agitation, anti-monarchism, and the political activities of old Chartists have all confirmed the persistence of a vibrant radical subculture that existed outside the sphere of contemporary liberal politics in the years after 1850.⁶⁰ Similarly, Jon

⁵⁷ B. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 203-204.

⁵⁸ D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, 'Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language', *Social History*, 17/2 (1992), pp. 165-188; J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, 'The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language: A Reply', *Social History*, 18/1 (1993), pp. 1-15; Joyce, 'The Imaginary Discontents of Social History', pp. 81-85; N. Kirk, 'History, Language, Ideas and Post-Modernism: A Materialist View', *Social History*, 19/2 (1994), pp. 221-240.

⁵⁹ Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, p. 93; R. McWilliam, 'Liberalism Lite?', *Victorian Studies*, 48/1 (2005), pp. 107-110.

⁶⁰ A. Taylor, "'Commons-Stealers', 'Land-Grabbers' and 'Jerry-Builders': Space, Popular Radicalism and the Politics of Public Access in London, 1848-1880", *International Review of Social History*, 40/3 (1995), pp. 383-407; A. Taylor, 'Reynolds's Newspaper, Opposition to Monarchy and the Radical Anti-Jubilee: Britain's Anti-Monarchist Tradition Reconsidered', *Historical Research*, 68/167 (1995), pp. 318-337; A. Taylor, 'The Old Chartist: Radical Veterans on the Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century

Lawrence's analysis of the radical press after 1867, which adopted a sceptical tone and a semi-detached attitude towards the Liberal party, has revealed some of the crucial tensions within the broad radical-liberal alliance.⁶¹ When seen through this lens, it becomes increasingly clear that the distinctions between radicalism and popular liberalism were far more pronounced and complex in the post-Chartist era than liberal revisionists had previously acknowledged.⁶²

Secondly, the work of non-liberal revisionists has produced what Matthew Roberts has described as an alternative 'currents of radicalism'.⁶³ In contrast to the liberal revisionist emphasis on radical-liberal unity, these scholars have identified continuities between a more assertive and politically independent form of radicalism and later labour and socialist politics. In fact, the links between radicalism and the 1880s socialist movement were recognised in the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, in 1973, Stanley Pierson noted how early British Marxists had sought to build on the radical tradition by appealing to the traditional ideas of 'justice' and 'fair play'.⁶⁴ Thus, for Pierson, the socialist revival of the 1880s did not represent a distinctive juncture in popular politics, but another step in the long 'cultural struggle to come to terms with the divisions of modern society'.⁶⁵ Further work in the 1990s added strength to this alternative narrative of continuity. Mark Bevir's writings on the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), which he characterised as a product of the radical tradition, have served to demonstrate the strong influence that ex-Chartists had on the party in its formative years.⁶⁶ Moreover, for Jon Lawrence, the endurance of this

Political Platform', *History*, 95/320 (2010), pp. 458-476; A. Taylor, 'After Chartism: Metropolitan Perspectives on the Chartist Movement in Decline, 1848-1860' in M. J. Turner (ed.), *Reform and Reformers in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Sunderland, 2004), pp. 117-135; A. Taylor, 'The Glamour of Independence': By-elections and Radicalism during the Liberal Meridian, 1869-83' in T. G. Otte and P. Readman (eds.), *By-elections in British Politics, 1832-1914* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 99-120.

⁶¹ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, pp. 170-172; Lawrence also discussed radical/liberal tensions in J. Lawrence, 'The dynamics of urban politics, 1867-1914', in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 94.

⁶² For other examples of this argument, see Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, pp. 12-13; 243; 307; J. Owen, *Labour and the Caucus: Working-Class Radicalism and Organised Liberalism in England, 1868-88* (Liverpool, 2014). M. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and nation in English radical politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 144; 191; 203; J. Owen, 'An inexplicable constituency? Organised Liberalism in Nottingham, 1868-1880', *Midland History*, 35/1 (2010), pp. 107-128.

⁶³ Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, p. 93.

⁶⁴ S. Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism: The Struggle for a New Consciousness* (London, 1973), pp. 62; 64; 177. See also Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*.

⁶⁵ S. Pierson, *British Socialists: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics* (London, 1979), p. 21. Scholars such as Logie Barrow and Edward Royle have located similar continuities within the subcultures of spiritualism and secularism. See L. Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850-1910* (London, 1986), p. 97; E. Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester, 1980).

⁶⁶ M. Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation 1880-1885: From O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, 37/2 (1992), p. 219. See also M. Bevir, 'Marxism and British

independent radical tradition makes it easier for historians to understand the radical contribution to later labour politics without having to resort to 'models of class polarisation'.⁶⁷

While this study suggests that this interpretation is the most convincing of the approaches discussed so far, it differs from it in three crucial ways. First, this study focuses on the radical influence on labour rather than socialist politics. At times, non-liberal revisionists have acknowledged this crucial distinction, but work in this tradition has often examined the continuities between radicalism and, for instance, the SDF, whilst largely neglecting the radical legacy on the non-socialist elements in the labour movement.⁶⁸ The distinction between socialism and non-socialist labourism is, historically, vitally important. Although the boundaries between these movements were far from clear-cut, organisations such as the SDF and the Independent Labour Party (ILP), and socialist activists more generally, were always small minorities in the trade union movement, let alone the wider working class.⁶⁹ Indeed, despite providing the early Labour party with a number of capable leaders, the influence of the ILP and other socialist societies, both organisationally and ideologically, was always out of proportion to their actual strength within the party.⁷⁰ For this reason, this study places more emphasis on the discourse, the attitudes, and the ideas of the *labour* activist, who was more representative of the average trade unionist in Bristol and Northampton than the activist from the SDF or the ILP.

Second, while non-liberal revisionists have examined localities where perceptions of class consciousness were somewhat ambiguous, this study offers an alternative view by demonstrating that activists in Bristol and Northampton defined

socialism', *The European Legacy*, 1/2 (1996), pp. 545-549; M. Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton, 2011), pp. 30; 46. See also L. Barrow and I. Bullock, *Democratic ideas and the British Labour movement, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 57; 303; Finn, *After Chartism*, p. 307.

⁶⁷ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 172.

⁶⁸ Pierson accepts that a non-socialist outlook within the trade unions helped to 'inoculate broad sections of the British working classes against the appeal of socialism', but focuses primarily on socialism. Pierson, *British Socialists*, pp. 19; 53. Similarly, while Barrow and Bullock examined the persistence of radical democratic traditions within the trade unions, they did so by focusing on internal democratic procedures within the unions and the demand for greater unity between them. Barrow and Bullock, *Democratic Ideas*, pp. 58; 181. Lawrence is more attentive to the distinctions between labour and socialist politics in *Speaking for the people*.

⁶⁹ Eric Hobsbawm 'generously' estimated that there were no more than 20,000 members of socialist organisations in Britain during the middle of the 1890s. Hobsbawm, 'The 'New Unionism' Reconsidered', p. 14.

⁷⁰ Out of a total Labour party membership of 1,612,137 in 1914, only 33,230 joined through the affiliated socialist societies, whereas 1,572,391 were members through their trade union membership. Of course, many socialists would have joined the party as trade unionists. H. Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party* (London, 1993), p. 206.

class in a clearer and more consistent way. For example, in his article on the rights of public access in London, Anthony Taylor described the London-based radical movement as both 'plebeian' and 'working-class' despite the often-contrasting meanings attached to these terms in previous revisionist work.⁷¹ Furthermore, while Jon Lawrence has argued that mid-Victorian radicalism in Wolverhampton could be as 'class-conscious' as later labour politics, he has also suggested that radicals principally saw their struggle as one between 'the 'industrious' sections of the community against the 'idle' and the 'spendthrift'.⁷² Of course, these ambiguities may well have been characteristic of popular politics in London and Wolverhampton. In Bristol and Northampton, though, the politics of class was a far more prevalent and consistent feature of working-class radical and labour discourse between 1867 and 1918. In contrast to the example of Wolverhampton, pre-war labour activists in Bristol and Northampton, like their working-class radical predecessors, directed their appeals exclusively to the working-class section of the community and promised to represent their class if elected to local or national office. They argued that the working class had distinctive interests and experiences that were separate from, but not necessarily antagonistic to, other classes. They placed a great deal of emphasis on the class composition of their organisations, a fact often reflected in their names and their constitutions. While they also used terms such as 'the people' and 'the masses' to describe their chosen political constituency, they used them in conjunction with narrower social definitions, such as 'the workers', which gave them a more exclusivist meaning. In Bristol and Northampton, class, in a sectarian but non-adversarial sense, formed a crucial and consistent element in working-class radical and labour political discourse.

Finally, despite doing much to reveal the tensions between radicalism and liberalism in the post-Chartist era, scholars in the non-liberal revisionist tradition have only briefly considered some of the frictions within the radical movement

⁷¹ Taylor, "Commons-Stealers", pp. 394; 401; 404-405.

⁷² Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, pp. 91; 115; 142-143; 146; 172. See also J. Lawrence, 'The Complexities of English Progressivism: Wolverhampton Politics in the Early Twentieth Century', *Midland History*, 24 (1999), p. 158. On ambiguities in national Labour party discourse, see J. Lawrence, 'Labour and the politics of class, 1900-1940', in D. Feldman and J. Lawrence (ed.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 259. See also Lawrence, 'The dynamics of urban politics', p. 96. James Owen has also argued that 'it was unusual for the labour movement to promote a narrow, sectarian conception of class'. Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, p. 41. See also Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation', p. 216.

itself.⁷³ The case studies of Bristol and Northampton demonstrate that while they drew upon a shared political discourse, radicals of different classes frequently gave terms contrasting meanings. Whereas middle-class radicals tended to see radicalism as a movement of the politically excluded (regardless of social background), working-class radicals offered a more distinctive and class-laden understanding of radicalism and the social order. Moreover, just as labour activists would do from the 1880s onwards, working-class radicals used 'the people' interchangeably with more class-specific terms, such as 'working classes', the 'labouring class', or 'working men'. There was, therefore, no need for labour activists in the 1880s, let alone in the period after 1918, to rework old radical ideas about 'the people' or about 'the nation' so as to give them a class-based dimension. For the politics of class did not emerge in Bristol and Northampton only after the formation of the Labour party in 1900, or after the revival of socialism and the growth of independent labour politics in the 1880s. Rather, it emerged out of the long political tradition of working-class radicalism.

1.2 Methodology

To examine the continuities between working-class radicalism and later labour politics, this study combines three different approaches, each of which require a brief but separate consideration.

1.2.1 Local Studies

This thesis uses local case studies of Bristol and Northampton to explore the complexities of popular politics in Britain between 1867 and 1918. The decision to focus on 'the local' emanates from a belief that purely national studies fail to fully appreciate the accents of politics at a local level.⁷⁴ Acknowledging these accents is especially important for historians of this period given the regionally fragmented nature of popular politics at this time.⁷⁵ Numerous studies of the early Labour party, for example, have highlighted the diversity of labour politics before 1918.⁷⁶ In

⁷³ Margot Finn is an exception. However, Finn still argues that middle- and working-class radicals eventually entered into an alliance to 'advance continental nationalism' during the 1850s and 1860s, thus forming a new 'social democratic' form of liberal politics. Finn, *After Chartism*, pp. 188-189; 227; 253; 273; 282; 307.

⁷⁴ Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 138; P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London, 1885-1914* (London, 1967), p. 1.

⁷⁶ For example, see Clark, *Colne Valley, Radicalism to Socialism*; P. Wyncoll, *The Nottingham Labour Movement 1880-1939* (London, 1985); B. Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism: Leicester working-class politics 1860-1906* (Leicester, 1987); M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880-1940* (Cambridge, 1987); S. Cherry, *Doing Different? Politics and*

particular, they have shown that, before the First World War, Labour was a grassroots movement that was composed of hundreds of parties that were 'all distinctive within their own geographical context'.⁷⁷ To be successful, these parties had to accommodate and adapt to local peculiarities and contexts.⁷⁸ The decision to use local studies for this project also stemmed from a belief that local experiences and developments more accurately reflect changes in political language and ideology than exclusively national accounts. As Matthew Worley has argued, it was local activists that most 'perceptibly encompassed' the 'actual and projected identity' of national parties, and who had the task of interpreting and articulating their party's ideology on a regular basis.⁷⁹ Very often, local activists' interpretation of this ideology could be quite at odds with that of national party leaders.⁸⁰ It is only by conducting local studies that historians can fully appreciate the tensions and complexities that characterised popular politics during this period.

There are three reasons why Bristol and Northampton make suitable case studies for examining popular political continuities between 1867 and 1918. Firstly, both places shared a broadly similar political trajectory throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸¹ From the mid-Victorian period to the early 1920s, the working-class areas of these constituencies were political strongholds of the Liberal party.⁸² Secondly, despite their tendency towards the Liberal party, both Bristol and Northampton produced dynamic radical and labour movements in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.⁸³ In the 1870s and the early 1880s, the radical movement in

the Labour Movement in Norwich, 1880-1914 (Hunstanton, 1989); A. Thorpe, 'J.H. Thomas and the Rise of Labour in Derby 1880-1945', *Midland History*, 15 (1990), pp. 111-128; J. Lawrence, 'Popular politics and the limitations of party: Wolverhampton, 1867-1900', in E. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain 1850-1914*, (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 65-85.

⁷⁷ Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, p. 2; M. Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-39* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 2-3; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, pp. 13; 79.

⁷⁸ M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939* (Oxford, 1982), p. 13.

⁷⁹ M. Worley, 'Building the Party: Labour Party Activism in Five British Counties between the wars', *Labour History Review*, 70/1 (2005), p. 75.

⁸⁰ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, pp. 13; 79; 81; 420.

⁸¹ Due to similar political circumstances and developments in Bristol and Northampton, Duncan Tanner placed them together in his explanation of Labour's uneven geographical development. See Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 293.

⁸² Between 1852 and 1885, the single member and predominantly working-class constituency of Bristol sent only one Conservative MP to Parliament. Although boundary changes in 1885 created four socially diverse constituencies, Bristol East, the most industrial and poorest constituency of the four, continued to elect Liberals consistently between 1885 and 1923. Similarly, Conservative candidates were successful on just four occasions in Northampton between 1837 and 1923. See Appendix. H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* (London, 1967), pp. 145-146.

⁸³ For the history of religious and political radicalism in Bristol and Northampton before 1867, see P. Fleming, 'The Emergence of Modern Bristol', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of*

Bristol, which was largely synonymous with the town's small trade unionist movement, formed its own, semi-independent organisations after failing to convince local Liberal leaders to adopt trade union electoral candidates. While the composition of the radical movement in Northampton was more socially heterogeneous, largely due to the shared desire of both working-class and middle-class radicals to send Charles Bradlaugh to Parliament, there remained marked distinctions and tensions within it that, at times, threatened to break up the pragmatic political alliance.⁸⁴ By the end of the 1880s, working-class radicals in these constituencies had become 'labour' activists. This was, essentially, a rhetorical change only, driven in part by the tendency of local political elites, journalists, and activists to speak of a local 'labour party' even when no organisation existed. While these 'labour parties' focused their attentions on the immediate goals of trade union growth and increased labour representation before 1914, it was only after the First World War that they finally achieved major electoral success.⁸⁵

Finally, Bristol and Northampton make interesting case studies because, despite their political similarities, there were significant economic differences between the two. Bristol's position as a leading trading port allowed it to attract various industries throughout the Middle Ages, and by the early nineteenth century, the city had evolved into a large urban centre with a slowly growing, diverse economy.⁸⁶ By 1871, Bristol's occupational structure was relatively heterogeneous and lacking a staple trade, with miscellaneous services (19.3%), clothing and

Modern Bristol (Tiverton, 1996), pp. 6; 13; M. Dresser, 'Protestants, Catholics and Jews: Religious Difference and Political Status in Bristol, 1750-1850', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996), p. 116; J. Kent, 'The Role of Religion in the Cultural Structure of the Later Victorian City', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5/23 (1973), p. 156; Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, pp. 145; 157; J. Cannon, *The Chartists in Bristol* (Bristol, 1964); J. Bennett, 'The London Democratic Association 1837-41: A Study in London Radicalism' in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London, 1982), p. 97; W. Adkins, *The Position of Northampton in English History* (Northampton, 1897), p. 14; *NM*, 3 October 1902; W. Griffin, 'The Northampton Boot and Shoe Industry and its Significance for Social Change in the Borough from 1800-1914' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Cardiff, 1968), pp. 152-153; R. Sykes, 'Early Chartism and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire' in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London, 1982), p. 173; E. Yeo, 'Some Practices and Problems of Chartist Democracy' in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London, 1982), p. 354.

⁸⁴ E. Royle, *The infidel tradition: from Paine to Bradlaugh* (London, 1976), pp. 68-69; Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and republicans*, pp. 23-28.

⁸⁵ See Appendix. For similar constituencies see Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ It was home to highly competitive industries such as shipping, textiles and iron and steel production, but also to more stable trades relating to perishables, construction, transport and tobacco. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, p. 141; P. Ollerenshaw and P. Wardley, 'Economic Growth and the Business Community in Bristol since 1840', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996), pp. 124-125.

footwear (16.9%) and construction (8.1%) accounting for the top three industries by employment.⁸⁷ In contrast, the lack of a rival to the boot and shoe trade made Northampton a one-industry town.⁸⁸ Despite technological innovations in the 1850s, it was not until the 1890s that employers phased out pre-industrial methods and began to introduce structural changes in techniques and productive organisation that 'transformed the industry'.⁸⁹ As a result, and despite fluctuations in employment, the total number of men, women, and children engaged in the boot and shoe industry in Northamptonshire rose from 25,081 in 1871 to 41,817 in 1911.⁹⁰

These political similarities and economic contrasts make Bristol and Northampton suitable case studies. Before considering the two other methodological approaches employed in this study, it is important to clarify that the intention of this study is not to suggest that Bristol and Northampton were typical constituencies that could be used to determine a complete national picture. As discussed earlier, the variations and fragmented nature of popular politics at this time ensures that any attempt to do so would be both misleading and futile. Rather, this study simply suggests that, by narrowing the focus of enquiry, historians may be able to highlight patterns between regions and/or similar political constituencies. It is also important to emphasise that this study is not a comparative analysis of Bristol and Northampton. There were, of course, significant differences between the two constituencies, both politically and economically. Yet, it is the similarities between the two that are of most importance for this study, and which will help to reveal some of the continuities within popular politics between 1867 and 1918.

1.2.2 Political Ideology: A Conceptual Approach

As well as exploring the way political activists articulated their understanding of class and class relations, this study also examines the dominant ideological perspectives

⁸⁷ Ollerenshaw and Wardley, 'Economic Growth and the Business Community in Bristol', p. 127; NUBSO MR, January 1887, MRC 547/P/1/6; NUBSO MR, May 1889, MRC 547/P/1/7. R. Whitfield, 'Trade Unionism in Bristol, 1910-1926', in I. Bild (ed.), *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol, 1983), pp. 68-70.

⁸⁸ In 1831, for example, a third of men living in Northampton could be described as shoemakers, rising to two-fifths by 1871. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, p. 110; Adkins, *The Position of Northampton in English History*, p. 19; Griffin, 'The Northampton Boot and Shoe Industry', p. 88; J. Howarth, 'Politics and Society in Late Victorian Northamptonshire', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 4/5 (1971), p. 269.

⁸⁹ A. Fox, *A History of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives 1874-1957* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 79; 358; K. Brooker, 'Northampton Shoemakers' Reaction to Industrialization: Some Thoughts', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 6/3 (1980), pp. 151-152; R. A. Church, 'The Effect of the American Export Invasion on the British Boot and Shoe Industry 1885-1914', *The Journal of Economic History*, 28/2 (1968), p. 228.

⁹⁰ Church, 'The Effect of the American Export Invasion', pp. 226; 250.

that shaped popular political movements between 1867 and 1918. Most of the accounts of popular politics discussed so far have considered the question of ideology, but they have tended to define ideologies by highlighting certain ideas that featured frequently within political programmes. However, defining ideologies in this way fails to demonstrate what is unique or distinctive about a particular ideology. For example, while a number of historians have correctly claimed that liberty was an important part of radicalism's conceptual architecture, this was, surely, true of all ideologies to differing extents. This study suggests that thinking conceptually about ideology, and, in particular, by using the approach most commonly associated with Michael Freeden, will help historians to trace and fully understand popular political continuities.⁹¹ Thinking about ideology in this way will also add clarity to many of the terms and concepts used throughout this study.

To begin, it is necessary to provide an overview of Freeden's model. For Freeden, ideologies are 'sets or conglomerates of ideas and concepts'.⁹² When perceived in spatial terms, these sets of concepts take the form of a concentric circle, with the 'core' concepts at the centre, the 'adjacent' concepts in the next band, and the 'peripheral' concepts on the outer edge. At the centre of any ideology is a group of core concepts that, if removed from their position, significantly alter its nature. For Freeden, it is the 'mutually influential relationship' between the 'core', 'adjacent' and 'peripheral' concepts within an ideology that gives them their specific meanings.⁹³ The example of liberalism neatly illustrates this point. Freeden considers the core concepts of Victorian liberalism to be liberty, individualism, progress, sociability, rationality, general interest, development, and limited and responsible power. These concepts, he argues, had specific meanings for liberals due to their proximity with the adjacent concepts of democracy, equality, education, and rights of property.⁹⁴ The particular arrangement of these concepts explains why liberals at this time identified themselves with movements that emphasised self-help, which emerged from the mutual relationship between the concepts of liberty, individualism, and progress, and thus became associated with 'non-constraint, choice-making, and valuable development'.⁹⁵

⁹¹ M. Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford, 1978); M. Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: a study in British political thought, 1914-1939* (Oxford, 1986); M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1998).

⁹² Freeden, *Liberalism Divided*, p. 2.

⁹³ Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 77-84; 438; 444; 447-449; 459.

⁹⁴ Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 83; 144-145; 148; 152-154; 159; 162; 165; 178.

⁹⁵ Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 145; 147; 190.

Using this conceptual approach has helped to uncover strong continuities between the ideologies of working-class radicalism and labourism as articulated in Bristol and Northampton. The first step was to formulate a practical definition of radical ideology, which, unfortunately, Michael Freedon has failed to provide.⁹⁶ Before outlining this definition, it is important to reiterate one of the central arguments of this study, namely, that a distinctly working-class form of radicalism differed in accent from the trans-class or popular form described by liberal revisionist scholars. While radicals of all classes laid emphasis upon similar values, they tended to imbue them with quite dissimilar meanings.⁹⁷ Freedon's model provides the tools necessary to fully understand how radicalism took on these different accents. The variations between different forms of radicalism emanated from the contrasting positioning of concepts, such as class and community, within their ideological 'morphologies'. For popular radicals, a movement that Eugenio Biagini defined as inclusive and heterogeneous in composition and outlook, the concept of community held a more important position within their ideological morphology than the concept of class. Working-class radicals, on the other hand, placed the concept of class closer to the core of their ideology, thus giving its core concepts a class-inflected dimension.⁹⁸

The first core concept of radicalism was democracy.⁹⁹ For radicals, democracy meant the participation, as far as possible, of all members of the community in the political life of the nation. As a result, they had little sympathy for institutions that lacked democratic accountability, such as the House of Lords.¹⁰⁰ Although they identified strongly with institutions that were under a certain amount of popular control, such as the House of Commons and a range of municipal bodies,

⁹⁶ For a useful summary of the origins of radicalism as a movement and a descriptive term, see Finn, *After Chartism*, pp. 34-50.

⁹⁷ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, pp. 16-17; 86. Other scholars have examined the way different political groups contested the meaning of a variety of ideas, concepts, and movements. See Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 296; J. Epstein, 'Our real constitution': trial defence and radical memory in the Age of Revolution' in J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 31; 42; 43; J. Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 122 (1989), p. 76; Finn, *After Chartism*, pp. 221-222.

⁹⁸ Lawrence, 'Labour and the politics of class', p. 253.

⁹⁹ Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, p. 16; Webb and Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, p. 367; Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 32; Pierson, *British Socialists*, p. 19; J. Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 31/2 (1992), p. 169; R. Ashcraft, 'Liberal Political Theory and Working-Class Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century England', *Political Theory*, 21/2 (1993), p. 253; Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 84; Finn, *After Chartism*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, *Lords of Misrule*, pp. 10-15; 98-100; 113.

radicals sought to strengthen their democratic and representative basis.¹⁰¹ All radicals wished to make political institutions representative of the community at large, and favoured policies, such as the extension of the suffrage, which would go some way towards ensuring this. However, *working-class* radicals understood democratic demands in class terms. While they did not deny the right of other classes to representation, they believed that the working class, as the most numerous section of the community, deserved its fair and proportionate share of representation on nominally democratic political bodies. As a consequence, they campaigned to strengthen the democratic basis of existing institutions by making them more reflective of the class composition of the community. The increased representation of their class in Parliament, which would become easier after the removal of property qualifications for voting and the payment of MPs, would make the representative system truly 'complete and national'.¹⁰²

Democracy is closely linked to constitutionalism, the second concept at the radical core.¹⁰³ As radicals perceived the English constitution to be based upon democratic principles, such as the sovereignty of the people and the authority of Parliament, they deemed it worthy of support.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, they also believed that institutions that drew their legitimacy from the constitution, such as Parliament, had become unrepresentative and unaccountable to the will of the people.¹⁰⁵ The radical critique of society thus focused on the concentration of political power and its 'corrosive influence' upon society.¹⁰⁶ They sought to 'extend and redefine' the 'proud political heritage of constitutional rights and parliamentary government', and advocated root and branch reforms to the constitution, the dismantling of landed privilege, and equality of political opportunity.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, despite the perceived imperfections in the political order, radicals always sought to use constitutional and legal channels to enact their desired political and social

¹⁰¹ Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, p. 83.

¹⁰² Letter 'A Voter' to *WDP*, 25 February 1870.

¹⁰³ J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 2-5; Taylor, 'Reynolds's Newspaper', p. 321; Royle, *The infidel tradition*, p. 155; P. Joyce, 'The constitution and the narrative structure of Victorian politics' in J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 188; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 7; 9; 296-297; Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 320; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, p. 286.

¹⁰⁴ Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 1; Finn, *After Chartism*, pp. 23; 44; K. McClelland, "England's greatness, the working man" in C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendall (eds.), *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 90-91.

¹⁰⁵ Finn, *After Chartism*, p. 321.

¹⁰⁶ Stedman Jones, *Languages of class*, pp. 102; 105.

¹⁰⁷ Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 1; H. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics, 1892-1914* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 48; Epstein, "Our real constitution", pp. 31; 42; 43.

reforms. While they advocated the abolition of certain bodies, such as the House of Lords, they remained committed to capturing and improving local and national political institutions as the first step towards remedying political and social ills.

The radical core was also composed of the concepts of rights and liberty.¹⁰⁸ Although these terms pervaded the political discourse of all political parties during this period, working-class radicals gave these terms a more restricted and class-specific meaning. In particular, they frequently justified their demands for democratic and constitutional reform with reference to the lack of rights, freedoms, and liberties afforded to the working class, to labour, and to the trade unions.¹⁰⁹ In political terms, they saw the extension of the franchise to working men, and the achievement of genuine popular sovereignty, as both 'the means of liberty and its substance and symbol'.¹¹⁰ They extended this language of rights to the industrial sphere. The frequent reference to 'tyranny' and 'despotism' within working-class radical discourse emanated from a belief that certain individuals had infringed upon the rights and liberties of their class at the workplace. Consequently, working-class radicals condemned individual capitalists for their 'tyranny' in 'oppressing' or 'usurping' the rights and liberties of labour by reducing wages or by undermining trade unionism.¹¹¹ The working-class radical notion of rights and liberties, therefore, took on both political and industrial meanings throughout this period.

Adjacent and peripheral concepts within radicalism's conceptual framework provided these core concepts with particular meanings. For example, the positioning of the concept of community alongside democracy and constitutionalism explains why radicals favoured the proportionate representation of the whole community on governing bodies. In addition, during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the internal morphology of working-class radicalism 'mutated' due to the emergence of the state as one of its marginal or peripheral concepts.¹¹² In Bristol and Northampton, this development emerged primarily from the psychological impact of the New Unionist strike wave, which brought formerly abstract questions into the

¹⁰⁸ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 32; Ashcraft, 'Liberal Political Theory', pp. 250-252; 258; Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, p. 46; Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, pp. 25; 83; Finn, *After Chartism*, pp. 44-45; 226; McClelland, "England's greatness, the working man", pp. 90-91.

¹⁰⁹ McClelland, "England's greatness, the working man", p. 95.

¹¹⁰ Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, p. 258; Cunningham, 'The language of patriotism', p. 69; Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Ashcraft, 'Liberal Political Theory', p. 263.

¹¹² Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 81. Pierson, *British Socialists*, p. 27; Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 78-82.

realm of practical politics.¹¹³ From this time onwards, working-class radicals began to see certain collectivist solutions, such as municipalisation, old aged pensions, limited nationalisation, and municipal employment of the unemployed, as practical and efficient ways of achieving their long-held goals.¹¹⁴ However, although the increasingly collectivist tone of working-class radicalism represented a programmatic change, it did not represent a conversion to socialist ideology.¹¹⁵ Indeed, as Michael Freedon has noted, collectivism is a method of social organisation, whereas socialism is a 'comprehensive set of beliefs which interprets and induces political action'.¹¹⁶ Far from undergoing a significant ideological conversion, working-class radicals simply began to perceive statist collectivism as a more effective means through which to expand democracy, and to strengthen the rights and liberties of the working class. This was an ideological evolution within, rather than against, working-class radicalism.

As working-class radicalism was undergoing its collectivist mutation in the 1880s and 1890s, the term 'labour' gradually replaced 'radical' within political discourse.¹¹⁷ For the sake of clarity, this study uses the loaded term 'labourism' to describe the dominant ideology of labour activists from the mid-1880s onwards.¹¹⁸ In adopting this term, it is important to stress that the difference between working-class radicalism and labourism was primarily rhetorical in nature. Between the mid-1880s and 1918, labour activists in Bristol and Northampton continued to demonstrate a strong sense of loyalty to the ideological concepts that had defined working-class radicalism. They continued to campaign peacefully for democratic reforms and for the greater representation of labour on governing bodies as a way to resolve class imbalances in political representation. They continued to condemn individual 'tyrannical' employers, who they believed had restricted the rights and liberties of trade unionists. They continued to consider themselves as part of a

¹¹³ Lawrence, 'Popular politics and the limitations of party', pp. 78-79.

¹¹⁴ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 12.

¹¹⁵ Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation', p. 219. See also Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 35.

¹¹⁶ Freedon, *The New Liberalism*, pp. 31-32.

¹¹⁷ Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ New Left critics of the Labour party, such as Ralph Miliband and Perry Anderson, used the term pejoratively to describe the moderation, reformism and defensiveness of the party. For example, see P. Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *New Left Review*, 1/23 (1964), pp. 40-43. For a discussion of this perspective, see M. Davies, 'Labourism' and the New Left', in J. Callaghan, S. Fielding and S. Ludlam (eds.), *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour politics and history* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 39-56. In a less partisan tone, Geoffrey Foote defined labourism as a set of assumptions with indistinct boundaries within which contrasting ideologies and ideas could compete. G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought* (Beckenham, 1986), p. 5.

separate and distinct class that they felt lacked, but were entitled to, an equal political and economic status with other classes. They also continued to favour a range of statist solutions that they saw as the most effective and efficient means through which to achieve their long-held goals. Labourism, which would eventually become the dominant ideology of the Labour parties formed in Bristol and Northampton in the Edwardian period, was essentially, in its underlying conceptual framework, working-class radicalism in a new guise.

1.2.3 Political Language and Sources

This study departs from the conclusions drawn by those in the liberal revisionist tradition, but it largely embraces the linguistic approach that characterised much of their work. Its methodology is strongly influenced by this approach, which has done much to convince historians to take a renewed interest in the 'beliefs and languages by which people constructed their world'.¹¹⁹ While it does not entirely ignore material factors, this study does not assume that verbal or written expressions were simply the products of one's class position, or that their identities and ideologies were determined by these material factors.¹²⁰ In short, to use the words of Margot Finn, it privileges 'subjective sentiments over ostensibly objective realities' and highlights 'perceptions of class consciousness rather than the economic substance of class relations'.¹²¹ Neither does it claim that all forms of popular discontent were evidence of an adversarial class consciousness.¹²² Indeed, in Bristol and Northampton, socio-economic factors, such as mass industrial unrest or structural industrial change, did not significantly alter activists' understanding of class, politics, or the social order. This study, then, embraces the linguistic analysis of empirical material to offer fresh insights into the way working-class radical and labour activists understood the world around them.

Unfortunately, a complete set of records for the various radical, socialist, and labour organisations in Bristol and Northampton do not exist. As a result, constructing a general picture of local popular politics has involved examining a range of different primary materials located in numerous archives and libraries. The first task was to construct a general political narrative of local politics by examining provincial newspapers at the British Library and via the online British Newspaper

¹¹⁹ M. Bevir, 'Republicanism, Socialism, and Democracy in Britain: The Origins of the Radical Left', *Journal of Social History*, 34/2 (2000), p. 351.

¹²⁰ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 40.

¹²¹ Finn, *After Chartism*, p. 7.

¹²² Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 11.

Archive. For the Bristol case study, the *Western Daily Press* (Liberal) proved to be especially useful due to its comprehensive reporting of political meetings, election campaigns, and other local events. The Liberal-leaning *Bristol Mercury* and the independent *Bristol Observer* also proved useful for filling gaps in the narrative, but complete records do not exist for either newspaper. Constructing an account of Northampton's political history between 1867 and 1918 was a relatively painless task due to the extensive reporting of both working-class radical and labour politics in the *Northampton Daily Echo* (Liberal), the *Northampton Independent* (Independent), and the *Northampton Mercury* (Liberal).¹²³ The activists that form the core of this study often expressed gratitude to the editors of these papers for the impartiality of their reports, at least outside of election time, and for the free publicity that they generated.¹²⁴ Of course, historians must be wary of subjectivities in all historical records, not least newspapers, but these expressions of approval certainly strengthen their validity as worthwhile sources.

Once a general picture of local politics began to emerge, extensive research was undertaken to examine the political language and ideas of radical and labour activists. For Bristol, this involved exploring a range of materials held at the Bristol Record Office, including the minute books, annual reports, leaflets, newsheets, and other ephemera relating to Bristol Trades' Council and its associated political organisations. As the records of the crucially important body are incomplete, it was necessary to look elsewhere, including the Labour History Archive and Study Centre in Manchester and the University of Bristol Library. The British Library of Political and Economic Science also proved to be invaluable due to its large collection of material relating to the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which was active intermittently in Bristol from 1895 onwards. This collection includes, amongst other things, monthly reports written by the general secretary of the Bristol ILP, the municipal programmes and leaflets of ILP electoral candidates, papers relating to the local pacifist movement during the First World War, and a wealth of material collected by Arthur Ebenezer Cooke, a trade unionist and socialist activist in Bristol before 1912. Finally, the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, which holds annual and monthly reports of numerous trade union societies, was a vital resource over the course of this study.

¹²³ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 288.

¹²⁴ For example, see *WDP*, 2 June 1933; *NTC M*, 26 March 1904; 20 April 1904; 16 November 1904; 22 March 1905; 6 January 1909, *NRO 1977/44/NTC1*; *NDE*, 25 July 1911; *NTC AR*, 1911, 1912, *NRO 1977/44/NTC2*.

The materials required to carry out a full case study of Northampton were less geographically scattered. The majority of research took place in Northampton itself at the Northamptonshire Record Office and the Northamptonshire Central Library. The former holds the complete minute books of the Northampton Trades' Council between 1895 and 1916, as well as annual reports and trade union advertisements, while the latter holds political ephemera relating to local parliamentary and municipal elections from the mid nineteenth century to 1960. The Central Library also maintains an extensive record of local newspapers, including the Social Democratic Federation's *Northampton Socialist* (1897 to 1900) and *Socialist Pioneer* (1913 to 1917). A research trip to the British Library, which holds the early annual reports of the Northampton Labour Representation Council, helped to complete this general picture of local popular politics. The most useful archive outside Northampton proved to be the Modern Records Centre, which holds a range of relevant trade union material, not least the monthly and conference reports of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO) between 1877 and 1971. Initially rather sparse in content, these reports became increasingly filled with relevant news stories, reports of trade union meetings, correspondence between union members on political questions, and individual accounts of local branches and their activities written by branch secretaries. They offered a valuable insight into the views of both NUBSO leaders and rank-and-file members.

Again, it is necessary to add a minor qualification. The purpose of this research was to explore the ways working-class radicals and labour activists articulated their understanding of class, class relations, and ideology. Therefore, this is the study of an active minority of informed political activists rather than the majority of the working-class population. It was these local activists who wrote the annual reports, maintained the minute books, sat on the executive committees, and compiled the political programmes of their organisations. In contrast to the majority of members and supporters of these organisations, this activist minority turned up most frequently to meetings, spoke more often at public meetings, and, increasingly, began to hold positions of political power. Furthermore, in Bristol and Northampton, it is important to note that they also largely failed to convince the majority of their chosen constituency to embrace their political programmes and visions.¹²⁵ Yet, while acknowledging these facts, and while accepting the past criticisms of this type of

¹²⁵ See Appendix.

approach, the intention of this study is not to suggest that this active minority truly embodied the values and aspirations of the wider working-class population.¹²⁶ Radical and labour activists, like all political activists, essentially spoke *for* the people, and played a crucial role in constructing their chosen political constituencies.¹²⁷ Nonetheless, it remains important for historians to give due weight to the language and views of the political activist. If activists did indeed construct political constituencies and collective identities, then examining the ways they did so remains a useful historical exercise. As long as studies of this kind acknowledge that their focus is on the promotion rather than the reception of political messages, then this remains a useful avenue of historical inquiry.

1.3 Chapter Outline

This study is an analytical narrative built around some of the key developments within popular politics between 1867 and 1918. A narrative structure is best suited to the purpose of study, which seeks to demonstrate the enduring influence of working-class radicalism on twentieth-century labour politics. To trace these continuities, and for the sake of clarity, each chapter considers the examples of Bristol and Northampton separately. The content under these two main headings is then organised into four different themes. The first theme discusses the political strategies adopted by local activists and examines the way they justified their decisions to work within or outside the Liberal party. The second theme explores the class identities articulated by radical and labour activists and, in particular, the way that assumptions about gender, nationality, place, and work shaped their understanding of who was, and who was not, a member of the working class. The third theme examines the way activists understood and verbalised their class-based but non-antagonistic view of the social order. The final theme focuses on ideology and, more specifically, the central ideological concepts that shaped working-class radicalism and its successor, labourism. The purpose of this final theme is to demonstrate that, despite undergoing an evolution in meaning, the concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights and liberty were central within both working-class radical and labourist ideology between 1867 and 1918.

¹²⁶ For criticisms of the activist-centred approach, see Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, p. 209; Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, pp. 48; 66; Lawrence, 'The dynamics of urban politics', p. 93; Host, *Victorian Labour History*, pp. 66-67.

¹²⁷ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 137.

The narrative of the study begins in 1867, the year in which a substantial portion of the male working class received the vote for the first time.¹²⁸ Chapter 2 explores some of the tensions between and within the radical and liberal movements in Bristol and Northampton between 1867 and 1885. Its intention is to revise both traditional and revisionist conceptions of radicalism in this period by demonstrating the vibrancy and continuing relevance of radicalism as a belief system, whilst also drawing attention to the tensions, not only between radicals and liberals, but also within the radical movement itself. Its central argument is that a working-class variant of radicalism, whose advocates understood the social order and radical ideology through the lens of class, existed as dynamic political movements in both constituencies. In chapter 3, the focus shifts to the relatively short period between 1885 and 1889, during which time working-class radicals began to identify as socialist and, more commonly, labour activists. This chapter contends that the emergence of 'labour parties' in Bristol and Northampton, whether in an actual or abstract form, did not represent a significant departure within popular politics, but rather an evolution within the working-class radical tradition. It suggests that, even as they were forming new organisations, labour activists continued to embrace working-class radical ideas about class, class relations, and ideology.

Chapter 4 considers the impact of major industrial conflict on labour politics in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Between 1889 and 1893, Bristol was a storm centre of the New Unionist strike wave. In 1895, Northampton's shoemakers engaged in the 'greatest lock-out that ha[d] ever occurred' in the industry.¹²⁹ This chapter, though, argues that despite their undoubted industrial significance, these developments did not substantially alter the way labour activists thought about class and the social order. Moreover, it suggests that while activists' solutions to a range of economic and social problems became increasingly collectivist, these developments represented an evolution within, not against, the ideology of labourism. Chapter 5 moves on to examine the way labour activists responded to a

¹²⁸ The 1867 Reform Act gave the vote in the boroughs to all adult male ratepaying occupiers and lodgers who lived in lodgings worth over £10 a year and who had been resident for at least twelve months. As a result, the percentage of enfranchised adult males (twenty-one and over) in borough constituencies in England and Wales increased from 6.9% in 1861 to 44.7% in 1871. Working-class voters, however, were still underrepresented. C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendall, 'Introduction' in C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendall (eds.), *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 5-6; K. Theodore Hoppen, 'The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland, 1832-1885', *History*, 80/229 (1985), pp. 210; 215.

¹²⁹ S. Bryher, *An account of the Labour and Socialist movement in Bristol: Part 2* (Bristol, 1931), p. 6; NUBSO MR, March 1895, MRC 547/P/1/1.

number of important developments after 1900, such as the birth of a national Labour party, the revitalisation of the Liberal party, and the pre-war labour unrest. Again, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that labour activists, even in the face of marked organisational and industrial change, retained a strong sense of loyalty to old ideas about class and ideology. The aim of the final chapter, which covers the period between 1914 and 1918, is to examine the effects of the First World War on local labour politics. It argues that the war, despite proving to be crucial factor in explaining the post-war political realignment in Bristol and Northampton, had relatively little impact upon the activities, the conceptions of class, and the dominant ideological perspectives of labour activists. For example, it suggests that most labour activists continued to articulate a restrictive conception of working class and also remained loyal to a non-adversarial model of society. Furthermore, far from undergoing any significant ideological conversion, labour activists felt that developments during the war years vindicated their continued adherence to the central concepts that had defined labourist ideology, and, before it, working-class radical ideology, in the years before 1914.

2: Radicalism and the Politics of Class, 1867-1885

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, working-class radicals in Bristol and Northampton formed political subcultures that were distinct from both mainstream liberalism and popular forms of radicalism. Despite their emotional attachment to the Liberal party and to national-level Liberal personalities, working-class radicals exhibited a class identity, a political language, and a set of ideological perspectives that served to distinguish their movement from other progressive forces. The unique character of their movement emerged from activists' particular understanding of class and class relations. More specifically, and in contrast to their middle-class allies, working-class radicals did not primarily see themselves as part of a socially broad nation of producers, or as a constituent element within an amorphous trans-class group of employers and workers. Rather, through their verbal and written discourse, they articulated a far narrower and more exclusivist sense of class, through which they strongly emphasised the unique characteristics, experiences, and interests of the working-class section of the population. At the same time, they distanced themselves from the politics of class conflict, and urged different sections of the community to engage in a process of dialogue, negotiation, and, ultimately, reconciliation. It was this sense of class, which was both exclusivist and non-antagonistic in tone, that informed the strategy, the class identity, and the ideology of working-class radicals in Bristol and Northampton before 1885.

This argument for the enduring vitality of a decidedly working-class radical movement challenges the conventional three-stage interpretation of nineteenth-century political history. For proponents of this interpretation, working-class politics between the end of Chartism in the 1840s and the revival of socialism in the 1880s was characterised chiefly by moderation, reformism, and accommodation with middle-class political leaders.¹ In an early example of this view, Sidney and Beatrice Webb suggested that the ideology of radicalism originated from outside the working-class movement entirely, and claimed instead that it had been imposed upon it by middle-class reformers.² This view of post-Chartist radicalism, though, fails to appreciate the assertiveness, the dynamism, and the often fiercely independent tone of its working-class adherents, and, in particular, the unique ways in which they

¹ For examples, see Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, pp. 182; 219; 221; Kirk, *Change, continuity and class*, pp. 26-27. Kirk, 'Class and the 'linguistic turn'', p. 116.

² Webb and Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 362; 366; 369; 374.

interpreted their political demands and their ideological perspectives. While liberal revisionist scholars have provided a valuable corrective to this stage-based narrative of discontinuity, they too have largely neglected the internal complexities of post-Chartist popular political movements. In their attempt to draw attention to the ongoing relevance of the popular radical tradition, these scholars have suggested that the movement was inter-class or 'plebeian' in character and composed of a heterogeneous and relatively harmonious group (not class) of workers, employers, and tradesmen.³ As a result, studies in the liberal revisionist tradition have tended to downplay the tensions, not only between radicals and liberals, but also between the different sections of the radical movement.

This chapter argues that mid-Victorian radicalism may best be understood not as an internally harmonious and 'plebeian' movement, but as a somewhat fragile and pragmatic alliance between two clearly demarcated class-based sections.⁴ This, at least, is the form that the movement took to varying extents in Bristol and Northampton. In these constituencies, radicalism was not the sole preserve of middle-class reformers who successfully managed to disseminate their ideas amongst a largely passive and non-ideological working-class population.⁵ Nor was it the movement of a socially indistinct category of 'the people' within which class distinctions and class-based tensions were absent. While radicals of all classes drew upon a shared political discourse and frequently emphasised a broadly similar set of ideological concepts, there were marked differences in the way middle-class and working-class radicals understood and articulated their understanding of popularly used terms, idioms, and principles.⁶ Middle-class radicals tended to define 'the people' in non-class terms, portraying it as a group of employers and workers who, they believed, were engaged in a constant state of struggle with the 'idle' classes. Conversely, working-class radicals offered a less inclusive interpretation of 'the people' by using the phrase interchangeably with more class-specific terms, such as the 'working classes' or 'working men'. In this sense, the realm of political discourse

³ Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 11; 51; 13; Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 4.

⁴ While non-liberal revisionist scholars have demonstrated tensions between liberalism and radicalism, they have not fully considered the tensions within the radical movement itself. For examples, see Taylor, 'After Chartism', pp. 117-118; 122; Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, pp. 170-172; Lawrence, 'The dynamics of urban politics', p. 94. For examples of radical/liberal tensions in other constituencies, see Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 80; Taylor, "The Glamour of Independence", pp. 99-120; Owen, "An inexplicable constituency'?", pp. 107-128.

⁵ Harrison, *Before the Socialists*, p. 3.

⁶ John Belchem has argued that the history of radicalism was 'informed and complicated by conflicting class inflexion of its political rhetoric'. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 187.

served as an important battleground through which radicals of different classes could articulate, clarify, and defend their particular, and often contrasting, interpretations of radical terms, values, and ideas.

The unique character of the working-class radical subculture was also evident in the way its members articulated their understanding of class, the social order, and radical ideology. Throughout this period, a range of restrictive assumptions about gender, nationality, work, and place shaped activists' understanding of the class to which they claimed to belong. Consequently, they defined themselves as spokespersons of the authentic, industrious, urban British working man (not woman), which served to marginalise and/or exclude agricultural labourers, working women, foreign workers, and 'paupers'.⁷ Additionally, their interpretation of the core concepts that underpinned radical ideology was quite at odds with that of middle-class radical activists. Again, while radicals of all classes emphasised the same ideological concepts - democracy, constitutionalism, rights and liberty - working-class radicals provided them with unambiguously class inflected meanings.⁸ Thus, they considered democratisation to be a process through which existing political institutions, including the Liberal party and the House of Commons, could become more fully representative of the class-divided community.⁹ They perceived lawful methods of reform, such as the election of sympathetic or *bona fide* labour representatives, to be the most appropriate and effective way of correcting the class imbalance in political representation.¹⁰ They frequently expressed their respect and reverence for the English constitution, which they believed granted certain political and industrial rights to 'working men' and to trade unions.¹¹ This interpretation of radicalism's core concepts did not emanate from an adversarial understanding of class relations, but from a belief that the numerically dominant

⁷ For male attitudes to women during this period, see A. J. Reid, *United We Stand: A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (London, 2004), p. 233. For attitudes to agricultural labourers, see M. Freeman (ed.), *The English Rural Poor, 1885-1914: Volume 2* (London, 2005), pp. 165-166; A. Howkins, 'Labour History and the Rural Poor, 1850-1980', *Rural History*, 1/1 (1990), p. 115. For attitudes to paupers, see Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 286-288; Hall, McClelland and Rendall, 'Introduction', p. 37; McClelland, 'England's greatness, the working man', pp. 89; 96-97. For nationalistic sentiments among British workers, see R. McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1998), pp. 81-89.

⁸ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 244.

⁹ In the late 1860s and early 1870s, radicals in a number of towns and cities, including Birmingham and Sheffield, expressed their wish to run working-class electoral candidates. See D. Mares, 'Transcending the Metropolis: London and Provincial Popular Radicalism, c.1860-75' in M. Cragoe and A. Taylor (eds.), *London Politics, 1760-1914* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 134. At times, radicals succeeded in running candidates. See Taylor, 'The Glamour of Independence', p. 109.

¹⁰ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 320.

¹¹ Finn, *After Chartism*, p. 226; McClelland, 'England's greatness, the working man', p. 90.

working classes deserved the same political and industrial rights as other sections of the community.

The aim of this chapter is threefold. Firstly, it seeks to reveal the existence of a decidedly working-class radical tradition that was politically and culturally distinct from both mainstream liberalism and populist forms of radicalism. Acknowledging the existence of this political tradition is necessary if we are to fully understand later political developments, such as the rise of labour politics in the mid-1880s. It will also help us to explain the character, the strategy, and the tone of later labour politics without having to turn to either a class-based model of discontinuity or a non class-based model of continuity. Secondly, by drawing attention to the pervasiveness of a non-conflictual sense of class within working-class radical discourse, it aims to challenge a number of assumptions that underlay both traditional and liberal revisionist interpretations of this period. More particularly, it contends that scholars in these traditions have missed this understanding of class because they have focused their attentions upon proving or disproving the existence of highly particular and antagonistic conceptions of class. Finally, it seeks to complicate the picture of post-Chartist radicalism as offered by scholars in the non-liberal revisionist tradition. As well as demonstrating a high degree of sensitivity to radical/liberal tensions, these scholars have suggested that there was a somewhat ambiguous relationship between class and the radical movement in certain urban centres. For example, in his article on the rights of public access in London between 1848 and 1880, Anthony Taylor used the terms 'plebeian' and 'working-class' interchangeably to describe the composition and character of metropolitan radicalism.¹² Similarly, in *Speaking for the People*, Jon Lawrence suggested that mid-Victorian radicals in Wolverhampton used both 'class-conscious' and more inclusive language, such as the 'industrious', the 'idle' and the 'spendthrift', at different times.¹³ While these ambiguities may well have been essential features of radical politics in the localities analysed in these studies, the examples of Bristol and Northampton provide an alternative view, which suggests that post-Chartist radical discourse and ideology could be more consistently and more determinedly 'class-conscious' in tone than these historians have previously acknowledged.

¹² Taylor, "Commons-Stealers", pp. 394; 401; 404-405. See also Taylor, "The Glamour of Independence", pp. 99-120.

¹³ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, pp. 91; 115; 142; 172. See also Lawrence, 'Labour and the politics of class', p. 240.

2.1 Bristol

As in a number of other urban constituencies throughout Britain in the mid-to-late Victorian period, tensions between the radical and liberal movements in Bristol revolved around the issue of working-class participation in the political process.¹⁴ Between 1867 and 1885, local radicals became increasingly frustrated with the perceived unrepresentative nature of the Bristol Liberal Association (BLA), as well as with the persistent refusal of its leaders to adopt working-class electoral candidates. To remedy this state of affairs, they formed a number of independent political organisations that acted as critical pressure groups outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, the BLA. Radicals in Bristol thus formed a political movement that had priorities and goals quite at odds with those of their mainstream liberal counterparts. The tensions that existed between these two movements, however, were more than simply political in nature. Whereas the BLA drew its leaders and representatives from the city's middle-class community, radical organisations were overwhelmingly composed of and led by working-class and trade union activists. The contrasting social basis of these two movements was not accidental. When radical activists established their own organisations, they often explained that they had lost their faith in the BLA precisely because of its middle-class character and composition. In Bristol, class served as the major fault line that separated the radical and liberal movements before 1885.

The strong association between the Bristol radical movement and the politics of class had been evident since at least the 1830s and 1840s, when working-class activists had played a leading role in the city's Chartist movement.¹⁵ After they received the franchise in 1867, many of these activists continued to demonstrate a sense of independence from mainstream liberalism by focusing their attentions upon the question of labour representation.¹⁶ This demand, which featured in all local radical programmes before 1885, emanated from a firm belief that the BLA and its municipal and parliamentary representatives did not truly represent the working-class section of the broadly conceived Liberal party. This sense of frustration was not

¹⁴ There were similar radical/liberal tensions in Bradford and London. See Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 20; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 258-259.

¹⁵ Class-based fault lines had divided the Bristol Chartist and Whig/Liberal movements in the 1830s and 1840s. See Cannon, *The Chartists in Bristol*, p. 16.

¹⁶ Even before the 1867 Reform Act, Bristol had the 'largest number of working class voters in its parliamentary electorate of any city outside London and Manchester'. D. Large, *The Municipal Government of Bristol 1851-1901* (Bristol, 1999), p. 9. The movement for electoral reform in the 1860s had been composed predominantly of what the *Western Daily Press* described as "'real" working men'. *WDP*, 8 November 1867.

unique to Bristol at this time, and it did not go unchallenged.¹⁷ In 1870, activists formed a Radical Association to organise the parliamentary campaign of George Odger, a nationally prominent trade unionist and a leading member of First International.¹⁸ Over the next decade, locally renowned trade unionists, such as John Cawsey, Thomas Hodge, and William Count, stood as representatives of the working classes in local School Board elections often in opposition to the wishes of the BLA.¹⁹ While their campaigns all ended in failure, the principle of direct labour representation did not disappear from the political programmes of the radical movement. In fact, as one member of the Working Men's Reform Association (WMRA) declared in 1877, the principle was the very first item in their programme, a statement that drew warm applause from those assembled.²⁰

The parliamentary campaign of Odger in 1870 left a lasting impression on the Bristol radical movement.²¹ The refusal of the overwhelmingly middle-class BLA to adopt a labour candidate convinced radicals of the need to establish a class-based organisation that would be composed of and led by trade unionists. The result was the formation of the aptly named Direct Representation of Labour League in 1873, and the Working Men's Reform Association (WMRA) in 1877. From the outset, these organisations were led by an assorted selection of working men, such as stonemasons, shoemakers, coopers, and building labourers.²² Furthermore, at the centre of all these organisational developments was the Bristol Trades' Council, a local, self-described 'parliament' of trade union societies that, despite its official neutrality on political matters, provided the radical movement with a substantial number of activists and leaders.²³ The composition of the radical movement's leadership was in marked contrast to that of the BLA, which, at this time, was led by members of the city's middle-class community. The dominant role played by

¹⁷ S. Bryher, *An account of the Labour and Socialist movement in Bristol: Part 1* (Bristol, 1929), p. 11; Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, p. 24. Local Liberal Associations became 'more professional and middle-class after the Second Reform Act'. By the beginning of 1886, 110 of 339 Liberal MPs were from the landed classes, 164 were professional men, 142 were active businessmen, and just 12 were from the working class. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, pp. 132; 140-141.

¹⁸ *BM*, 11 June 1870; Taylor, "The Glamour of Independence", p. 113.

¹⁹ *BM*, 24 January 1874; *WDP*, 23 January 1877; Large, *The Municipal Government of Bristol*, p. 10.

²⁰ *WDP*, 15 September 1877.

²¹ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 11; *BM*, 11 June 1870.

²² Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 16; *BM*, 20 September 1873; 24 January 1874; 18 February 1878; *WDP*, 16 July 1877; 18 February 1878. Newspapers frequently reported that radical meetings were attended chiefly by 'working men'. See *RN*, 13 March 1870. Other radical organisations, such as the Bristol Industrial, Social, and Political Association of Working Men, had a similar composition. *WDP*, 9 March 1870.

²³ D. Large and R. Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council, 1873-1973* (Bristol, 1973), p. 5: The trades' council refused (by 10 votes to 9) to affiliate to the WMRA as a body, but this did not prevent individual delegates from joining.

manufacturers within liberal politics continued well into the 1880s, when Christopher Thomas, the head of a soap manufacturing business, became the BLA's president.²⁴ Furthermore, the middle-class nature of the BLA was apparent in its choice of municipal and parliamentary election candidates. In 1885, the BLA's slate of candidates for that year's municipal elections included a tobacco manufacturer and a 'gentleman', while its parliamentary candidates included a merchant and a colliery owner.²⁵ In fact, every Liberal candidate elected to the City Council between 1867 and 1885 could be described as a member of the middle classes.²⁶

There were thus clear differences in the class composition of the Bristol radical and liberal movements. In terms of their political strategy, working-class radicals engaged in what Jon Lawrence has described as a 'semi-detached' relationship with the Liberal party.²⁷ This term is an appropriate description of the Bristol radical movement for two reasons. Firstly, despite regularly expressing their disappointment with the BLA, and even as they formed their own independent political organisations, working-class radicals still maintained a broad sympathy with the historical traditions of the Liberal party. In 1870, for example, a co-founder of the Bristol Radical Association maintained that his organisation represented little more than one faction within the 'unity Liberal party'.²⁸ Members of the WMRA, formed in 1877, expressed similar sentiments. T. M. Kelly, one of the WMRA's chief organisers, claimed that he remained a liberal, but not a Whig, despite working outside the BLA.²⁹ At its bi-annual meeting in 1878, the chair of the WMRA also stated that he and other members of the organisation remained loyal to the principle of 'Liberal progress'.³⁰ Radical organisations in Bristol, then, acted as critical but sympathetic pressure groups that sought to make the BLA truly representative of its social base and more responsive to the demands of its working-class supporters.

Secondly, working-class radicals in Bristol were 'semi-detached' because, despite their orientation towards the BLA, they always exhibited a strongly independent and thoroughly class-based political identity, which helped to distinguish them from middle-class liberal activists. The unique nature of this identity was particularly apparent when radicals participated in political campaigns that

²⁴ Large, *The Municipal Government of Bristol*, pp. 9; 12-13; *BM*, 18 March 1885.

²⁵ *WDP*, 26 October 1885; 24 November 1885.

²⁶ Large, *The Municipal Government of Bristol*, p. 12.

²⁷ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 172.

²⁸ *BM*, 18 June 1870.

²⁹ *WDP*, 3 October 1877. See also *WDP*, 16 July 1877; 15 September 1877.

³⁰ *BM*, 18 February 1878. See also *WDP*, 18 June 1877; 20 April 1882.

developed outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, mainstream liberalism.³¹ These campaigns, which included the movement in favour of the Tichborne claimant and the struggle to send the atheist Charles Bradlaugh to Parliament, drew attention to the political and social differences between radicals and liberals in Bristol.³² For example, while radicals offered their moral and financial support to Bradlaugh's campaign during the 1880s, Samuel Morley, the senior Liberal MP for Bristol, resolutely opposed it and urged Northampton's electors to vote for the Conservative candidate 'as an act of allegiance to God'.³³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morley's actions on this question angered local radical activists. He was, they claimed, 'no longer worthy of the confidence and support of the Liberal electors of Bristol' because, through his words and deeds, he had 'forsaken the principle of civil and religious liberty'.³⁴ While Morley received the support of the BLA, he decided to retire his seat at the 1885 election, much to the delight of those in the local radical movement.³⁵

Radicals in Bristol hailed Morley's retirement as a victory, but they were ultimately unsuccessful in achieving their primary objective, parliamentary labour representation, before 1885. The final years of the WMRA were characterised by dissension and internal disagreements over its relationship with the BLA.³⁶ Those who prevailed in these struggles used a typically strong language of class when criticising their former allies, who, they claimed, were 'men that dislike work' and who lived on the 'proceeds of sympathy of philanthropic men ... and on the credulity of their own class'.³⁷ Indeed, throughout this period, local radicals spoke frequently and proudly of the class basis of their organisations, and regularly reminded those in attendance at political meetings that these bodies had been formed by *bona fide* working men. They justified their support for the principle of labour representation in similar terms, insisting that only genuine members of the working classes could truly understand their experiences and travails. At the same time, while they placed a strong emphasis on class distinctions, they rarely encouraged class conflict. Instead, they acknowledged the right of all sections of the community to a fair share

³¹ See Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 176-177; A. Taylor, 'Republicanism reappraised: anti-monarchism and the English radical tradition, 1850-1872' in J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 171; 178; Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* pp. 46-47; Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, pp. 243; 307; 316; Finn, *After Chartism*, p. 203.

³² For more on the Tichborne case, see McWilliam, 'Radicalism and popular culture', pp. 44-64.

³³ *BM*, 9 June 1881; 23 June 1881; *WDP*, 1 March 1882; 11 April 1882.

³⁴ *BM*, 11 May 1881; *WDP*, 4 April 1882; 23 November 1882.

³⁵ *WDP*, 10 January 1884.

³⁶ *WDP*, 20 March 1878.

³⁷ Letter 'A Real Reformer' to *BM*, 21 March 1878.

of political representation, and accepted the rights of both capital and labour to a fair share of the product of their industries. Consequently, they condemned the unequal distribution of political and economic power, which they believed had historically favoured, and continued to favour, the aristocracy and 'middleocracy', and sought to reduce these inequalities through peaceful political pressure, increased labour representation, and stronger trade union organisation.³⁸ In Bristol, working-class radicals tempered the exclusivist and sectarian aspects of their conception of class with a non-antagonistic, and, at times, overtly conciliatory, attitude to class relations.

The prevalence of class-exclusivist sentiments within radical discourse suggests that, contrary to the liberal revisionist view, there could be a strong relationship between post-Chartist radicalism and the politics of class. This was certainly the case in Bristol, where a strong sense of class largely shaped the discourse, strategy, and ideology of the radical movement. The exclusivist aspect of this conception of class appears frequently in radical literature, speeches, and discussions at this time. It is particularly noticeable when radicals discussed their primary political demand of labour representation. For these activists, this demand was vitally important for the working classes because, however much middle- and upper-class politicians could claim to understand their interests, only men of their own order could truly represent them on local and national governing bodies.³⁹ As John Cawsey, a prominent member of the city's trade union movement, explained in 1873, the working classes would only achieve genuine representation in Parliament when 'the man who worked in a workshop or factory, or in the mines' sat there.⁴⁰

For Cawsey, workers needed to form political organisations 'composed entirely of working men' to achieve this goal, as socially heterogeneous organisations, such as the BLA, had repeatedly demonstrated their disapproval of the principle.⁴¹ Cawsey and his radical colleagues also used this sectarian language of class when discussing and denouncing rival political organisations. At a meeting of the WMRA in 1877, T. M. Kelly of the Operative Labourers' Union ridiculed the poorly attended meetings of the cross-class BLA and contrasted them to the vibrant radical

³⁸ A radical activist used this term at a meeting of the Bristol Industrial, Social, and Political Association of Working Men in 1870. *WDP*, 9 March 1870.

³⁹ *WDP*, 18 December 1873.

⁴⁰ *WDP*, 18 December 1873; *BM*, 20 December 1873; 22 March 1878.

⁴¹ *WDP*, 9 March 1870. There are numerous examples of activists emphasising the exclusive nature of their organisations. For examples, see Letter 'J. Moss, secretary of Bristol Radical Association' to *RN*, 13 March 1870; *BM*, 20 December 1873.

meetings of what he described as '*bona fide* working men'.⁴² Similarly, Thomas Hodge, the first president of the WMRA, criticised the 'coterie of employers' at the top of the BLA who, he argued, had unfairly monopolised the candidate selection process. As he reminded those assembled at a meeting in 1877, the broadly conceived Liberal party was 'composed of working men' and, therefore, 'they had a right to be heard in the selection of their representatives'.⁴³

These statements suggest that working-class radicals in Bristol did not see themselves as part of a socially broad populist movement but as members and spokespersons of a far narrower social constituency: the authentic working classes. This understanding of class shaped radical activists' understanding of popularly used terms such as 'the people'. While universalist terms were certainly not absent from their vocabulary, activists tended to give these terms more exclusivist meanings by using them in conjunction with, rather than in place of, narrower social definitions. For example, at a meeting of the WMRA in 1877, Thomas Hodge told his audience that, once they had won the sympathy of the 'working classes of Bristol', their organisation would be able to show 'the people' that power could be exercised intelligently.⁴⁴ The fluidity with which working-class radicals moved from using broad phrases to using more class-specific terms was also apparent in April 1878, when local activists met to discuss the question of manhood suffrage. During a speech in which he repeatedly referred to economic definitions of class, a lecturer told those assembled that they were the 'wealth producers' who made up the 'labouring class'. This class, he continued, had numerical superiority over 'the middle and upper classes', and, as a result, he believed that they should receive the same political rights as any other section of the community.⁴⁵ He further maintained that the middle and upper classes had 'reaped all the benefits that were derived from the honest toil of the *great mass*'. This blending of the 'labouring class' with the 'great mass', and the critical assessment of the activities of the 'middle and upper classes', would have left the speaker's audience in no doubt as to who he believed the 'people', or the 'great mass', to be.⁴⁶

It is difficult to argue that this interpretation of 'the people' emanated from a classless vision of the social order, in which the working classes and the middle

⁴² WDP, 3 October 1877: Emphasis in original.

⁴³ WDP, 16 July 1877.

⁴⁴ WDP, 23 July 1877.

⁴⁵ McClelland, "England's greatness, the working man", p. 90.

⁴⁶ WDP, 10 April 1878.

classes formed a broad, internally harmonious and industrious section of the community.⁴⁷ It is equally difficult to argue that it derived from an antagonistic view of class relations, whose proponents perceived capital and labour to be engaged in a bitter and unceasing conflict. Instead, working-class radicals in Bristol believed that the working classes, due to their numerical superiority, ought to possess an increased and fairer share of political power, which they hoped to achieve through peaceful means.⁴⁸ Indeed, local radicals were very keen to counter accusations of political extremism, and often denied that their demands would challenge the rights or the property of the middle classes. As a supporter of George Odger explained in a letter to the *Western Daily Press* in 1870, while local radicals were comfortable with the 'upper and middle classes' sending their own political representatives to Parliament, they simply demanded in return that the 'numerous industrial class' of Bristol should be allowed to put forward a candidate of their own choosing.⁴⁹ Working-class radicals, despite acknowledging that different classes had particular interests, did not see class distinctions as evidence of, or justification for, class conflict. As a radical candidate for the Bristol School Board argued in 1880, they merely sought to demonstrate that 'rich and poor, learned and unlearned, could sit together and unite upon a common platform'.⁵⁰

Radical activists applied this non-antagonistic understanding of class to the question of industrial relations. This outlook pervaded the early statements of the Bristol Trades' Council, which emerged in 1873 to organise and develop the trade union organisations of 'any section of the industrial classes'.⁵¹ Again, while this organisation had a very specific purpose, as well as a thoroughly working-class composition, its members tended to adopt a conciliatory tone when discussing the relations between capital and labour. G. F. Jones, who wrote the annual reports of the trades' council during this period, recognised the tensions between employers and their employees, but believed that they could be resolved through 'friendly interchange' and 'mutual arrangement'.⁵² Similarly, at a meeting of trade unionists in

⁴⁷ This is also true of the Bristol Chartist movement. For example, at a meeting of the Bristol Working Men's Association in 1838, Henry Vincent stated that 'the people were called the lower orders, and so they were; they were at the bottom, the middle class was upon them, the aristocracy was upon them'. Cannon, *The Chartists in Bristol*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ See *WDP*, 3 October 1877. See also *WDP*, 16 July 1877.

⁴⁹ Letter 'A Working Man' to *WDP*, 25 February 1870.

⁵⁰ BTC M, 15 June 1880, BRO 32080/TC1/2A: Emphasis added.

⁵¹ BTC M, Notes made by Sidney Webb, BRO 32080/TC1/2B.

⁵² *BM*, 15 May 1880. Similar sentiments featured prominently in trade union discussions and literature. For examples, see *WDP*, 22 May 1875; 10 May 1879; *BM*, 31 May 1881.

1882, the chairman of the trades' council accepted that society was divided into classes, but felt that this was due to their geographical separation. He considered this to be unfortunate and hoped that communication and meetings would help to 'break the down the barriers' that existed between different classes.⁵³ For these activists, trade unions could, and should, play a crucial role in this reconciliatory process. As the shoemaker William Count explained in 1875, workers did not form trade unions in antagonism to the employers. In fact, Count actively encouraged employers to form comparable organisations in the belief that all sections of the community, including capital, had a right to combine to defend their own interests.⁵⁴ Like his fellow radicals, Count acknowledged that different sections of the class-based community had particular interests, but did not consider inter-class conflict to be either desirable or necessary.⁵⁵

When they discussed political and industrial questions, Count and other leaders of the Bristol radical movement claimed to speak on behalf of the working-class section of the community. Their perception of the working classes, however, was less inclusive than this term would at first seem to suggest. In their verbal and written discourse, they often excluded certain categories of worker, such as agricultural labourers, women workers, foreign workers, and certain sections of the unemployed, from their definition of this class. This is not to suggest that they always expressed indifference or overt hostility to 'other' categories of worker. At times, they took a keen interest in the concerns and the demands of, say, rural labourers, and even organised meetings and demonstrations in support of their respective struggles. Yet, at the same time, they tended to regard these struggles as fundamentally distinct from those of the male, British, and urban working man. Moreover, they frequently used terms, expressions, and phrases that only served to highlight the otherness and the peculiarity of other workers. Whether they did so explicitly or implicitly, it was far more common for working-class radicals to emphasise the differences between, rather than the shared experiences of, different sections of the working classes.

This was especially true when they discussed agricultural labourers. Again, local radicals did not entirely neglect the concerns of the rural labourer. Throughout the 1870s, they consistently offered their support to those who fought strenuously

⁵³ *BM*, 1 December 1882. See also *BM*, 28 November 1884.

⁵⁴ *WDP*, 29 July 1875; 20 December 1877.

⁵⁵ This view corresponds closely with the 'social democratic theory of the class struggle' as described by Peter Clarke. Clarke, 'The social democratic theory of the class struggle', p. 9.

for the right to form their own trade unions.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, they often implied that the rural labourer was a distinct category of worker whose experiences, demands, and circumstances were fundamentally different from those of the urban worker. For instance, when trades' council delegates expressed their sympathy with the plight of rural workers in 1878, they did so out of a sense of 'moral ... support', not because they identified with their 'unfortunate circumstances'.⁵⁷ At times, urban-based trade unionists adopted a critical tone when discussing their rural counterparts and, more particularly, their propensity to depress the wages of the urban worker by migrating to towns and cities.⁵⁸ On other occasions, they downplayed the grievances of rural labourers entirely, as in 1873 when T. M. Kelly of the Operative Labourers' Union insisted that the problems encountered by those in Bristol's building trade were just as great as those experienced by rural labourers.⁵⁹ This tendency to overlook the concerns of the rural labourer was apparent at a public meeting on the land question organised by the trades' council in 1879. While delegates spoke of the impact of separating the peasantry from the soil, the resultant diminution of labour, and the dependency of Britain on foreign imports, they, somewhat revealingly, made no mention of the wages, the conditions, or the concerns of the agricultural labourer.⁶⁰

The marginalisation of the rural labourer, and their exclusion from the urban radical definition of the working classes, was also the fate of the female worker. Sometimes, the marginalisation of women workers was entirely deliberate. In 1874, for instance, the Bristol Trades' Council refused to unionise women at a local cotton factory because they had supposedly acted as blacklegs in a previous strike.⁶¹ Trades' council delegates also expressed ambiguous views on the question of female suffrage, and refused to support the Women's Suffrage League in its campaign for the enfranchisement of women householders and landowners in 1880.⁶² It was more common, though, for male trade unionists to marginalise women by using gendered

⁵⁶ BTC M, 21 November 1878; 20 November 1879, BRO 32080/TC1/2A; *BM*, 1 February 1873.

⁵⁷ BTC M, 21 November 1878, BRO 32080/TC1/2A.

⁵⁸ *WDP*, 17 July 1884. Between 1871 and 1881 rural population suffered an absolute decline for the first time since census records began. J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London, 1993), p. 42.

⁵⁹ *WDP*, 5 February 1873.

⁶⁰ BTC M, 20 November 1879, BRO 32080/TC1/2A.

⁶¹ BTC M, 2 April 1874, BRO 32080/TC1/2A; K. Kelly and M. Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement, 1885-1985', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996), p. 212.

⁶² BTC M, 2 April 1874; 16 December 1880, BRO 32080/TC1/2A.

terms, such as 'working man', in their public political discourse.⁶³ Secretaries of the trades' council always addressed their annual reports to their 'fellow workmen' and made numerous references to 'working men' and the 'workmen' in their literature.⁶⁴ Gendered language also pervaded the statements written by local trade union officials. The secretary of the Boot and Shoe Operatives' Union wrote frequently of the 'workmen' or 'Society men' during this period, despite the presence of female operatives within his union.⁶⁵ Within local radical discourse, the working classes were divided sharply along the lines of gender long before the mid-1880s.⁶⁶

Radicals in Bristol also emphasised the distinctions between the English and the non-English working man.⁶⁷ Their views on nationality emanated from a deeply nationalistic sense of class, which led them to argue, firstly, that the English working man had unique traits and virtues, and, secondly, that they were part of a centuries-long indigenous political tradition.⁶⁸ Sentiments of this kind were most apparent during discussions about the importation of foreign labour, a question that local trade unionists took a great deal of interest in throughout this period.⁶⁹ When they discussed this question, local trade unionists tended to blend economic arguments with nationalistic sentiments. As Thomas Hodge of the WMRA argued in 1877, foreign migrants tended to do work that 'naturally belonged to the English artisan'.⁷⁰ G. F. Jones made an almost identical argument in the 1878 annual report of the trades' council, in which he claimed that the ultimate intention of those who employed foreign labour was to 'supplant the English artisan'.⁷¹ As John Fox of the Labourers' Union explained in 1877, radicals did not only oppose this because it was economically 'unjust', but also because it was a deeply 'unpatriotic' action on the part of the employers.⁷²

⁶³ To demonstrate the consistency of this linguistic custom throughout this period, see John Cawsey's appeal for the formation of a trades' council in 1867, published in the *WDP*, 29 July 1867, and a report of a trades' council meeting in 1884, *WDP*, 16 May 1884.

⁶⁴ BTC AR, published in *WDP*, 13 May 1878.

⁶⁵ NUBSRF MR, September 1878, MRC 547/P/1/1. See also *WDP*, 22 May 1875.

⁶⁶ Hunt, 'Fractured universality', p. 65.

⁶⁷ Finn, *After Chartism*, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁸ Working-class radicals often emphasised 'sober, respectable and independent manhood'. McClelland, 'England's greatness, the working man', p. 101. In contrast to Hugh Cunningham, Paul Ward has argued that 'radical patriotism' survived during this period despite the emergence of a more conservative 'language of patriotism'. Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, p. 19. See also Cunningham, 'The language of patriotism', pp. 57; 70-71.

⁶⁹ *WDP*, 20 December 1877; BTC M, 8 May 1879, BRO 32080/TC1/2A.

⁷⁰ *WDP*, 20 December 1877.

⁷¹ BTC AR, published in *WDP*, 13 May 1878.

⁷² *WDP*, 20 December 1877; BTC AR, published in *WDP*, 13 May 1878.

While local radicals included those who had temporarily lost their job in their definition of the working classes, they spoke critically and disdainfully of those who were, as one activist stated, 'tainted by pauperism'.⁷³ When, in the 1880s, they put pressure on governing authorities to provide work for the unemployed, they made it clear that they only sought to assist those who were authentic and genuine working men - not, it should be noted, working women - who had lost their jobs through no fault of their own.⁷⁴ These men were not, as radical activists frequently pointed out, paupers. They were honest and industrious men who dreaded having to ask for help from charitable institutions. As one trades' council delegate pointed out in 1880, these men would rather sell everything they owned than submit to the Poor Law Board.⁷⁵ In Bristol, the radical view of the unemployed was highly restrictive in tone, and served to marginalise those paupers who, like rural labourers, women, and foreign workers, were deemed to be outside of the authentic working classes.⁷⁶

This exclusivist sense of class shaped local activists' understanding of radical ideology, which, in its underlying conceptual framework, differed markedly from mainstream liberalism. The concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty, all of which featured prominently in radical political discourse at this time, formed the core of this ideology, while adjacent concepts, such as community, gave these concepts a particular meaning.⁷⁷ In Bristol, though, working-class radicals also gave these concepts a marked class accent. Thus, when they discussed democracy, they contrasted the political domination of the upper classes with the lack of political power held by the working classes. While they exhibited a strong sense of pride in the English constitution, they condemned the class inequalities that characterised mid-Victorian society. Although they spoke frequently of rights and liberty, they often associated these concepts with the rights of labour and the liberties of the trade unions. By inflecting radicalism's core concepts with a class accent, working-class radicals articulated an ideology that differed not only from liberalism, but also from populist forms of radicalism.

⁷³ *WDP*, 29 July 1867; 1 March 1877; *BM*, 29 January 1880; 30 January 1880. See also Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 286-288.

⁷⁴ *BM*, 30 January 1880; 12 April 1881; 4 July 1883.

⁷⁵ *BM*, 2 February 1880. Charles Manby Smith, a journeyman printer who worked in Bristol in the mid-Victorian period, had expressed similar views in the 1850s. While proudly declaring his identity as a 'working-man', Smith offered no sympathy for the 'lazy and filthy vagabonds' who were a 'burdensome tax' upon 'the working-classes'. See C. M. Smith, *The Working-man's Way in the World: Being the Autobiography of a Journeyman Printer* (London, 1853), pp. 13-14.

⁷⁶ McClelland, "England's greatness, the working man", p. 89.

⁷⁷ Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 77-82.

This is not to say that there were no programmatic overlaps between different progressive traditions. The concept of democracy, for example, was an important concept within all variants of radicalism and liberalism in mid-Victorian Britain.⁷⁸ Throughout this period, radicals and liberals in Bristol committed their respective organisations to a range of democratic demands, such as manhood suffrage, shorter Parliaments, and equal electoral districts, which they hoped would strengthen the representative basis of existing political institutions.⁷⁹ Yet, while there was nothing particularly distinctive about these demands, what was unique was the way working-class radicals understood and articulated them. For example, in contrast to mainstream liberals, they primarily associated the concept of democracy with the principle of labour representation, which they believed would make political institutions, such as Parliament and the City Council, more reflective of the community at large. As they perceived the community to be divided along the lines of class, it followed that they favoured a proportional form of representation that would give each class its fair share of political power. Unfortunately, as William Count argued in 1877, land and capital were already fully represented on these bodies, whereas the working classes were not.⁸⁰ As a consequence, working men, argued John Cawsey, had a 'greater right, or at least an equal right' than any other class to political representation. For radicals like Cawsey, the solution to the democratic deficit in British politics was for working-class voters to elect men of 'their own order' to Parliament, as these men were, they argued, the 'best judges' of the wants and needs of the working classes.⁸¹

For working-class radicals, the demand for increased labour representation was consistent with the democratic principles that underpinned the English constitution. Far from seeking to subvert the constitution, radicals sought to extend it and to redefine its meaning.⁸² As George Odger explained during his 1870 parliamentary campaign, the election to Parliament of working men would break down the 'exclusive system' that had historically undermined the true meaning of the constitution.⁸³ Similarly, in a letter to the *Western Daily Press*, one of Odger's

⁷⁸ Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 154-156.

⁷⁹ *BM*, 20 December 1873; *WDP*, 16 July 1877; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 11.

⁸⁰ *WDP*, 16 July 1877; 15 September 1877.

⁸¹ *WDP*, 18 December 1873. Labour representation was the stated central objective of all working-class radical organisations in Bristol throughout this period. See Letter 'J. Moss, secretary of Bristol Radical Association' to *RN*, 13 March 1870; *BM*, 20 September 1873; *WDP*, 16 July 1877. For examples of activists defending this principle, see *WDP*, 13 June 1870; 18 January 1877.

⁸² Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 1.

⁸³ *RN*, 27 March 1870.

supporters claimed that radicals, by wishing to send working men to Parliament, aimed to make the representative system 'complete and national'.⁸⁴ This democratic reading of the constitution helps us to understand why radicals expressed such strong disapproval of the House of Lords.⁸⁵ At a meeting organised in Bristol in response to the Lords' rejection of the Franchise Bill in 1884, several radical activists argued that the existence of such an undemocratic body dishonoured the core meaning of a constitution that, they believed, guaranteed the sovereignty of the people and the authority of nominally democratic institutions. For Alfred Harris of the trades' council, the Lords was a moribund body that was not, and had never been, responsible to the nation. J. D. Marshall adopted a harsher tone and argued that the irresponsible members of the Lords, who, after all, represented nobody, had no right to 'put their feet on the necks of ... the people who desired the franchise'.⁸⁶ While the actions of the Lords aroused the ire of working-class radicals, it was its unrepresentative and undemocratic basis that convinced activists to demand its reform or abolition.⁸⁷

When discussing the Lords and other political questions, radicals in Bristol tended to draw upon a range of concepts and terms such as rights, liberty, justice, and fairness.⁸⁸ Again, their interpretation of these concepts was based upon a democratic reading of the constitution. As they saw the constitution as guaranteeing certain rights to all men, working-class radicals condemned those individuals and institutions that they perceived to be guilty of violating these rights. Radicals in Bristol offered fervent support to Charles Bradlaugh for precisely this reason. They did not necessarily support him because they shared his religious views, but because he had entered into a constitutional struggle in which the 'liberty of the people' was at stake.⁸⁹ As the active Congregationalist J. D. Marshall admitted in 1881, radicals 'did not so much defend Mr. Bradlaugh' as their 'rights and liberties as Englishmen. (Cheers)'.⁹⁰ For local radicals, Bradlaugh's opponents had used unlawful and unconstitutional means to deprive those who had voted for him of exercising their just parliamentary rights. As a result, they portrayed Bradlaugh's supporters in

⁸⁴ Letter 'A Voter' to *WDP*, 25 February 1870.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *Lords of Misrule*, pp. 104; 109.

⁸⁶ *WDP*, 17 July 1884; 21 July 1884.

⁸⁷ The trades' council passed a resolution in 1884 calling for 'the Peers to be relieved of their hereditary privileges'. *WDP*, 17 July 1884. The Bristol Radical Reform Association unanimously passed a resolution a few days later calling for the Lords to be 'abolished forthwith'. *WDP*, 23 July 1884.

⁸⁸ Taylor, *Lords of Misrule*, p. 113.

⁸⁹ *WDP*, 14 January 1882.

⁹⁰ *WDP*, 30 May 1881. See also *BM*, 9 June 1881.

Northampton, to whom they offered moral and financial support, as engaging in a legitimate battle for 'rights against might'.⁹¹

Again, for working-class radicals in Bristol, the concepts of rights and liberty had strong class undertones. They believed that the unequal distribution of economic and political power threatened the right of the working man, firstly, to a fair share of political representation, and, secondly, to a just wage. As John Cawsey argued in 1870, working-class radicals sought both 'political justice' and a 'better social position'.⁹² Consequently, they singled out 'tyrannical' employers who, by reducing the wages of their employees or by opposing trade unionism, had acted in an 'unjust' manner.⁹³ They defended their fellow workers who engaged in strike action either to defend their 'just rights' or to receive a 'fair share of the profits'.⁹⁴ Moreover, despite the official non-political stance of their industrial organisations, they also sought to amend or repeal a number of laws, including the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which prevented workers from being 'placed on the same footing as the rest of the community'.⁹⁵ In fact, this desire for what one activist described as an 'equality of rights' inspired many radicals in Bristol during this period.⁹⁶ T. M. Kelly, the secretary of the Operative Labourers' Union, neatly summarised this view at his union's annual meeting in 1873. Working-class radicals in Bristol, he explained, demanded recognition and representation for their class, as well as the removal of those statutes that 'unfairly treated them' and which had placed them in a 'disadvantageous position' in society. By forming their own political and industrial organisations, and by utilising constitutional and peaceful methods, Kelly predicted that the class to which he belonged 'would yet assert their right'.⁹⁷

Kelly was also a leading member of the WMRA before it split acrimoniously in 1885.⁹⁸ After its demise, the forces of local radicalism scattered amongst a variety of old and new organisations. The formation of a nominally democratic Liberal Federation convinced a number of trade unionists that the Liberal party could finally

⁹¹ *BM*, 8 March 1882.

⁹² *WDP*, 9 March 1870; 22 May 1875.

⁹³ Activists used these terms frequently at trade union meetings. For examples, see *WDP*, 9 July 1872; 5 February 1873; 7 May 1874; 20 December 1877; 10 May 1879; *BM*, 29 March 1878.

⁹⁴ Letter 'The United Committee' to *WDP*, 14 June 1879. This letter was sent by the committee that managed a strike of joiners in 1879.

⁹⁵ *BM*, 27 March 1880.

⁹⁶ *WDP*, 30 May 1881. See also Letter 'Secretary' to *BM*, 23 June 1881.

⁹⁷ *WDP*, 16 July 1873.

⁹⁸ Members changed the name of this organisation to the Bristol Radical Reform Association in late 1881. *WDP*, 7 January 1882.

become a truly representative body.⁹⁹ Other activists remained outside of the confines of organised Liberalism and entered a range of new organisations, such as the Independent Ratepayers' Association, the Labour League, and the Social Democratic Federation.¹⁰⁰ By the end of 1885, therefore, working-class radical activists in Bristol had taken their strong tradition of organisational independence, their class-inflected ideological perspectives, and their proud trade unionist identities into a diverse range of progressive political organisations.

2.2 Northampton

In terms of its social composition, the post-Chartist radical movement in Northampton differed markedly from its counterpart in Bristol. Here, radical organisations had a less well-defined class basis and were, in effect, broad coalitions of middle-class and working-class activists. Furthermore, the primary objective of radicals in Northampton was not direct labour representation but the election to Parliament of the renowned atheist and secular campaigner, Charles Bradlaugh.¹⁰¹ The outward appearance of organisational unity, however, obscured the very real class-based tensions that existed within the Northampton radical movement. This movement was essentially a political alliance of two distinct sections, each of which had their own identities, outlooks, and priorities. While working-class radicals rarely challenged middle-class activists for leadership of their shared organisations, their support was always conditional upon the leadership's ability to articulate their demands in a certain way. In short, when middle-class radical leaders accommodated the demands of working-class radical activists, the alliance remained secure. On the other hand, if they veered away from this conciliatory path, then working-class radicals would, and did, threaten to establish their own organisations. In this sense, Northampton radicalism was not an internally harmonious or populist movement in which class played little role, but a pragmatic alliance of two distinct and mutually suspicious sections.¹⁰²

By acknowledging the pragmatic and class-based nature of this alliance, it becomes easier to explain the strategy and the tone of the labour movement that

⁹⁹ *BM*, 18 March 1885.

¹⁰⁰ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 32-33; *WDP*, 8 March 1882; 10 January 1884; 12 February 1886.

¹⁰¹ Bradlaugh, a self-declared atheist since his teenage years, formed the National Secular Society in 1866. W. Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case: A Study in Late Victorian Opinion and Politics* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 9; 13.

¹⁰² As argued by Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 4; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, p. 11.

emerged in Northampton in the mid-1880s. Before this time, middle-class radicals were largely successful at holding this alliance together, mainly because most radicals in Northampton, regardless of their social position, shared one common objective: the election to Parliament of Charles Bradlaugh. As Bradlaugh played a significant role in shaping the political history of the town, it is necessary to summarise the events that surrounded his election battles in the 1880s. The refusal of Liberal leaders to endorse Bradlaugh's candidatures in 1868 and 1874 had caused a rift (and a riot) between liberals and radicals in the town, but the ongoing electoral damage caused by these divisions, which had allowed the Conservatives to capture Northampton's two Parliamentary seats, eventually led to a compromise.¹⁰³ At the general election in April 1880, Bradlaugh was victorious alongside the Liberal nominee, Henry Labouchère, and radical-liberal unity was restored three months later with the formation of the Liberal and Radical Union (LRU). Bradlaugh's struggle to enter Parliament, however, was not over. After attempting to make a secular affirmation rather than taking the parliamentary oath, the House of Commons resolved not to allow Bradlaugh to do either. 'The Bradlaugh case' quickly became a *cause célèbre* throughout Britain. The LRU, now largely dominated by middle-class radicals, offered their unwavering support to Bradlaugh and helped him to achieve six election victories in six years.¹⁰⁴ Eventually, after numerous legal challenges, protest meetings, and petitions, the Commons allowed Bradlaugh to take the oath, and his seat, in early 1886.¹⁰⁵

By the end of 1886, radicals in Northampton had not only realised their primary objective, but had managed to accomplish something that radicals in Bristol had long sought after: the reunification of liberals and radicals within a nominally representative organisation.¹⁰⁶ The success of these campaigns, however, concealed the political and cultural differences that existed between middle-class and working-class radicals in Northampton.¹⁰⁷ Although it had existed long before the 1870s, the

¹⁰³ Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and republicans*, pp. 23-24. For more on the Bradlaugh riots, during which Bradlaugh's supporters attacked various Liberal establishments in the aftermath of the 1874 by-election, see *NM*, 10 October 1874.

¹⁰⁴ Bradlaugh was successful in the general election of 1880, by-election contests in 1881, 1882, 1884, and the general elections of 1885 and 1886. *NM*, 30 January 1891.

¹⁰⁵ For more on the Bradlaugh case, see Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and republicans*, pp. 23-28.

¹⁰⁶ *NM*, 9 October 1880.

¹⁰⁷ Identifying these tensions is, admittedly, a challenging task, mainly because middle-class politicians and sympathetic newspaper editors sought to promote an image of internal social and political harmony within the radical movement. Through their control of political organisations and the provincial press, leading radicals were able to both downplay tensions within the local movement, and to offer their own populist interpretation of radicalism.

voice of the working-class section of the radical movement became more audible in local affairs after the formation in 1873 of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Rivetters and Finishers (NUBSRF), which sought to organise Northampton's large community of shoemakers.¹⁰⁸ It did not take long for NUBSRF members to express their dissatisfaction with the selection of certain manufacturers as radical municipal candidates. With the encouragement of William France, an early secretary of the NUBSRF branch and a prominent member of Bradlaugh's election committee, trade unionist radicals began to confront the middle-class leadership of the Radical Association, but were informed, in 1879, that the affairs of trade union societies could not be discussed at political meetings.¹⁰⁹ In an angry report sent to his Union's governing council, France criticised those radicals who favoured trade unionism for the agricultural labourers but who would 'howl at you as if you were some inferior animal' if one mentioned combination for the town's shoemakers.¹¹⁰ Even in the months prior to Bradlaugh's successful election campaign in 1880, relations between the different sections of the local Northampton movement were far from harmonious.

Indeed, this internal feud spilled over to the letter pages of the *Liberal Northampton Mercury*. Again, working-class radicals adopted a hostile tone towards the middle-class leaders of the Radical Association, mainly due to the perception that they were opposed to, or at least ambivalent towards, trade unionism. Robert McMillan, a local trade unionist, openly accused Bradlaugh's election agent, the master baker Thomas Adams, of opposing the formation of a journeyman baker's association.¹¹¹ McMillan, France, and a small group of trade unionists subsequently resigned from the Association, but not before condemning its local leaders in strong class terms. 'I have given in my resignation', France wrote, 'not because I am any less a Radical, but because I have noticed, for a long time, that the association is fast growing into a middle-class association'. Middle-class radicals, he claimed, were not

¹⁰⁸ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 78. Local shoemakers, who made up a substantial proportion of the town's population at this time, had long been radical-minded in their voting habits. In 1831, a third of men living in Northampton were shoemakers, and this had risen to two-fifths by 1871. V. Hatley, *Shoemakers in Northamptonshire 1762-1911: A Statistical Survey* (Northampton, 1971), pp. 5; 10. By the middle of the century, nearly half of the town's parliamentary electorate were considered working class in the census. Furthermore, in 1871, 89.4% of adult males were registered to vote in the town, compared to 58.2% in Birmingham, 38.0% in Liverpool, and 72.5% in Nottingham. M. Taylor, 'Interests, parties and the state: the urban electorate in England, c. 1820-72' in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 57. See also Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ *NM*, 25 October 1873; 15 March 1879; 16 August 1879.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 78.

¹¹¹ Letter 'Robert McMillan' to *NM*, 22 March 1879.

radicals in the true sense of the term because they simply used working men as 'stepping stones' to political power. His fellow workers had, he argued, lost their sense of independence when they left the Twenty-Fives, a public house previously frequented by an advanced and thoroughly working-class group of radical activists.¹¹²

In his resignation letter, France advised his fellow working men to found a 'working men's society of their own'.¹¹³ That this initially failed to materialise does not confirm the absence of class-based tensions within the Northampton radical movement. In fact, these tensions continued even after France's resignation. In 1880, a group of trade unionists actively campaigned against the municipal candidature of Richard Cleaver, the Liberal president of the Master Builders' Association, because he was opposed to the 'just rights of working men'.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, just three years later, a 'Trades Unionists' Candidate' stood in the School Board elections because certain Radical councillors had 'punished working-men' and had refused to 'fight the uphill fight for the artisans'.¹¹⁵ Working-class radicals, therefore, offered only conditional support to middle-class radical and liberal election candidates.¹¹⁶ Even as they worked within the socially broad radical organisations, they formed a disobedient, vocal, and assertive political section that frequently challenged the perceived moderation and condescension of their middle-class leaders. In this sense, the radical movement in Northampton was a pragmatic political coalition rather than a heterogeneous movement of 'the people'.

The unique character of the working-class section of the local radical movement was also evident in the way its members articulated their understanding of class and the social order. Whereas middle-class radicals presented a populist vision of the social order that depicted the crucial struggle in society as one between 'the people' and the 'idle' classes, working-class radicals presented a more class-divided model of society that, whilst acknowledging the benefits of inter-class political co-operation, placed more emphasis on the nuanced distinctions *within* 'the people'. As a consequence, even when they worked within cross-class political organisations, working-class radicals frequently drew attention to the contrasting interests of different sections of the community. In terms of their conception of

¹¹² Letter 'William Cory France' to *NM*, 23 August 1879.

¹¹³ Letter 'William Cory France' to *NM*, 23 August 1879.

¹¹⁴ 'To Trade Unionists and Non-Unionists', *NCL* 198-781/9/1880. Conservative party literature also criticised Cleaver for 'grinding the wages down'. See 'A Conversation overhead between two Working Men, Friday, October 22nd, 1880', *NCL* 198-781/9/1880.

¹¹⁵ *NM*, 6 January 1883.

¹¹⁶ Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 172.

class, and despite their divergent political strategies, there were thus noticeable similarities between the working-class radical movements in Bristol and Northampton.

That middle-class and working-class radicals could offer contrasting conceptions of society in post-Chartist Britain has largely been downplayed by liberal revisionist scholars. Yet, in Northampton, a populist understanding of the social order was largely the preserve of middle-class activists who led local radical organisations and who featured most prominently in newspaper reports of radical meetings. These middle-class radicals, most of whom were small businessmen and traders, made a conscious effort to present their movement in a populist light, and insisted that it was composed of both employers and employees who worked together in an unproblematic relationship.¹¹⁷ It was also amongst these activists that the term 'the people' took on a trans-class meaning. For instance, the house agent and radical activist Thomas Purser was quite adamant that 'the people' did not refer to the 'less educated' or to the 'lowest of our fellow-townsmen', as moderate liberals had claimed. Rather,

'when he spoke of people, he did not allude to one class only, although there were many who thought the Radical portion of the community were meant. It was true that the Radicals of the present day and of former days had been more especially the advocates of the working classes, but in speaking of the people he meant all classes'.¹¹⁸

Horatio Warren, a local grocer, had offered a similarly populist view of the radical movement in 1873. In a paper delivered to the Northampton Radical Society, Warren argued that radicals desired legislation 'not for one class - high, middle, or low - but for the entire community'. Warren, like Purser, was keen to downplay any notion of class exclusivity:

¹¹⁷ The dominant members of the Radical Association were described in the local press as 'gentlemen', bakers, house agents, tea merchants, tailors and drapers, shoe manufacturers, printers, and booksellers. *NM*, 29 October 1881; 23 December 1882; 30 October 1886; 25 October 1895.

¹¹⁸ *NM*, 24 April 1875; 10 February 1877. Some of the literature produced by the local Liberals associated Bradlaugh supporters with lack of intelligence and drunkenness. See 'Bradlor's Friend', *NCL* 198-781/9/1868.

'Radicalism, then, what does this mean? Legislation for the working classes, demolition of the rights of property, destruction of social order, the tyranny of a majority, the subjection of masters to men, of capital to labour, the reign of demagogism or of the professed agitator. None of these; none of these'.¹¹⁹

This was the voice of a populist or middle-class form of radicalism. While certainly the most frequently articulated interpretation of radicalism within local political discourse, it was by no means the only one. As we have seen, the attempts by middle-class leaders to downplay or deny class distinctions within their movement largely obscured its true nature, which was always an alliance between, rather than a fusion of, different class-based sections.¹²⁰ In Northampton, there existed a dynamic working-class radical subculture that was closely associated with the town's large body of shoemakers. As well as exhibiting a particular set of traits and a unique culture, these shoemaker radicals articulated an exclusivist understanding of class quite at odds with that of their political allies.¹²¹ As one activist admitted in 1873, they aimed their appeals 'more directly [to] the working class vote' even when they engaged in political activity alongside middle-class leaders and politicians.¹²² The growth of trade unionism amongst Northampton's shoemakers in the early 1880s further strengthened the class-based tone of these appeals. In 1882, Bradlaugh's campaign committee distributed a leaflet, written by London-based trade unionists, which informed the 'Workmen' of Northampton that if Bradlaugh was barred from the Commons, the opponents of radical reform would use the same weapon against other men 'elected by *the working classes* to obtain the reforms necessary to *our very life*'.¹²³

Class was an important element within local working-class radical discourse. In fact, the politics of class featured to such an extent in Bradlaugh's campaigns that

¹¹⁹ *NM*, 11 January 1873.

¹²⁰ NUBSRF MR, September 1877; MRC 547/P/1/1.

¹²¹ For instance, shoemakers were renowned for their uncompromising sense of independence and their fondness for beer. They also had a certain amount of freedom at the workplace. For details, see Brooker, 'Northampton Shoemakers' Reaction to Industrialisation', pp. 151-154; J. H. Saxton, *Recollections of William Arnold* (Northampton, 1915), pp. 22; 35; 43-44; J. Hawker, *A Victorian poacher: James Hawker's journal* (Oxford, 1978), p. 2; NUBSRF MR, June 1879; MRC 547/P/1/1.

¹²² Letter 'A Working Man' to *NM*, 20 December 1873. See also *NM*, 21 November 1868; 'To the Supporters of Charles Bradlaugh', NCL 198-781/9/1868. Some working class voters opposed Bradlaugh because he was *not* a worker. See 'Liberal Working Man's Reasons for Opposing Mr. Bradlaugh', NCL 198-781/9/1882.

¹²³ 'Fellow-Workmen and Electors of Northampton', NCL Series: 198-781/9/1882: Emphasis added.

his opponents, both Liberal and Conservative, felt compelled to release their own class-inflected literature. The purpose of these appeals was to convince Bradlaugh's working-class supporters that their political idol was little more than a dishonest, middle-class agitator. In 1868, a Liberal poster included a fictional dialogue between two voters, 'A' and 'B'. After expressing his support for another radical candidate as a working man, 'B' quickly corrected 'A' and asserted that Dr. Frederick Lees was a 'middle-class tradesman' and a paid lecturer. The leaflet criticised Bradlaugh in almost identical terms:

'He says he is a working man, and a good many of his supporters really think so, whereas the account of his life which I see in their own windows, shows that he was first a soldier, and after that, as far as I can make out, a lawyer's clerk, and has never been a working man at all.'

'A' was convinced and promised to persuade his fellow workmen to vote for Bradlaugh's Liberal opponents.¹²⁴

This leaflet is significant for our understanding of mid-Victorian radicalism for two reasons. First, it demonstrates, contrary to the liberal revisionist interpretation, that there could be a strong relationship between radicalism and the politics of class. That moderate liberals felt the need to produce such a leaflet suggests that radical activists had succeeded in convincing at least some voters that Bradlaugh was an authentic member of the working classes.¹²⁵ Bradlaugh was certainly not above making such claims himself. At election meetings, he referred frequently to his humble origins and his modest occupational history, experiences that, he believed, had given him the 'right to represent the working men'.¹²⁶ Like his working-class supporters, he too often directed his appeals to working-class voters exclusively, suggesting, for example, that he had lived in the midst of them, and had felt 'the biting grip of their wants'.¹²⁷ Consequently, he argued that he was the true 'working man's candidate'.¹²⁸ Second, this leaflet is important because it suggests that an

¹²⁴ 'What The Little Bird Heard: A Dialogue', NCL Series: 198-781/9/1868.

¹²⁵ The tendency amongst politicians to 'place oneself on a level with the crowd' was, as Jon Lawrence has noted, commonplace by the late nineteenth century. J. Lawrence, 'The British Sense of Class', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35/2 (2000), p. 309.

¹²⁶ *NM*, 15 August 1868; 19 September 1868.

¹²⁷ *NM*, 18 July 1868.

¹²⁸ *NM*, 15 August 1868; 21 November 1868.

exclusivist sense of class had a certain level of electoral purchase in Northampton at the time. The leaflet does not, after all, counter Bradlaugh's claims by evoking universalist themes, but by drawing an even sharper class contrast between working men and middle-class professionals. The apparent success of this strategy convinced local liberals to release a similar poster during the 1874 general election. Entitled 'A Contrast', the poster depicts, on the left, a shoemaker and supporter of Bradlaugh called 'Crispin', who sits in a poorly maintained house surrounded by boots and his five children. The right side of the poster presents a very different scene, showing Bradlaugh and his fellow campaigners sitting in a well-furnished room under a chandelier. One of Bradlaugh's companions compliments him on his 'good eating, good drinking, and good everything else', to which Bradlaugh reminds him that they owe it all to the thousands of 'dirty fellows' who support them.¹²⁹

Representations of the independent-minded and class-conscious working man featured prominently in all party political appeals in Northampton during this period.¹³⁰ As in Bristol, though, working-class radicals emphasised class distinctions but not class conflict. This non-antagonistic understanding of class was particularly discernible at the meetings organised in support of the Nine Hours' Movement, which, in the absence of a local trades' council, acted as a unifying force for working-class activists in the early 1870s.¹³¹ During these meetings, it was typical for activists to demand a nine-hour day in their respective industries whilst denying that they did so out of a spirit of hostility to their employers. As one radical admitted in 1872, many manufacturers acted admirably towards their workers.¹³² Those within the Nine Hours' Movement, he claimed, drew a clear distinction between two classes of employers: those who were generous and those who had yet to meet the standard set by 'honourable manufacturers'.¹³³ Working-class radicals extended this view of class relations to the question of strike action, which they considered to be harmful to both workers and employers.¹³⁴ Even William France, the trade union activist who decried the middle-class domination of the Radical Association, expressed his desire to dispense with strikes. He was proud that his union branch was not troublesome

¹²⁹ 'A Contrast!', NCL Series: 198-781/9/1874: St. Crispin is the patron saint of shoemakers.

¹³⁰ For example, in 1882, the Conservatives produced a leaflet claiming that they were the 'true friends of the Working Classes'. 'Who Passed the Reform Bill?', NCL Series: 198-781/9/1882.

¹³¹ In Northampton, this movement involved shoemakers, engineers, painters, carpenters and joiners. *NM*, 6 January 1872; 2 March 1872; 30 March 1872.

¹³² *NM*, 3 February 1872.

¹³³ *NM*, 3 February 1872. For similar views, see *NM*, 9 December 1871; 21 February 1880; 6 March 1880; 13 November 1880.

¹³⁴ *NM*, 2 March 1872. See also *NM*, 3 February 1872.

and believed that Boards of Arbitration were the fairest means through which to settle disputes.¹³⁵ This understanding of class, whilst certainly exclusivist and based upon the idea of sharp social distinctions, was non-conflictual in tone. As officials within the NUBSRF argued, the working classes wished to form their own trade unions, not for the purpose of antagonism, but to protect themselves. Trade unionists combined to 'defend and not to defy'.¹³⁶

What is perhaps surprising, given the marked socio-economic contrasts between Bristol and Northampton, is the extent to which working-class radicals in both constituencies offered a broadly similar understanding of class and class relations. This is also true of their perception of who was, and who was not, part of the authentic working classes. There were, admittedly, slight differences between these conceptions, caused largely by the contrasting levels of rural and foreign immigration into Bristol and Northampton at this time. Moreover, the dominance of one industry in Northampton allowed a somewhat narrower class identity to emerge amongst radical activists, who, for example, placed a stronger emphasis on the uniqueness not only of the working classes, but also of shoemakers in particular.¹³⁷ These differences, though, were largely ones of emphasis. As in Bristol, the class identity of working-class radicals in Northampton was based upon a restrictive set of assumptions about gender, nationality, place, and work. Through their language and activities, they tended to marginalise, and, at times, exclude, rural labourers, working women, foreign workers, and certain sections of the unemployed. When they spoke of the working classes, working-class radicals in Northampton tended to mean British, urban, and male working men.

This was despite their ongoing sense of attachment to rural life. The boundaries between 'the urban' and 'the rural' were undoubtedly more fluid in Northampton than they were in Bristol. At this time, the town's dominant boot and shoe industry was largely concentrated in rural towns and villages throughout Northamptonshire, rather than in the county town itself.¹³⁸ For example, William Arnold, who worked as a shoemaker in Northampton at this time, recalled that his father had been a traditional village shoemaker who also did agricultural labour at

¹³⁵ NUBSRF MR, November 1877, MRC 547/P/1/1.

¹³⁶ NUBSRF MR, October 1881, MRC 547/P/1/3. Local NUBSRF activists made similar arguments. See *NM*, 6 March 1880.

¹³⁷ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 23.

¹³⁸ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 18.

harvest time with his wife.¹³⁹ James Hawker, one of Arnold's contemporaries, also grew up in a rural village and worked on the fields from the age of eight before entering the Northampton boot and shoe trade.¹⁴⁰ In fact, the majority of Northampton's residents throughout this period were recent arrivals from countryside districts.¹⁴¹ Their rural upbringings, though, did not prevent urban-based shoemakers from viewing rural migrants as a threat to their industrial position. The ready supply of cheap labour from surrounding boot-making villages became an increasing problem after the formation of the NUBSRF in the mid-1870s.¹⁴² Trade unionists became particularly irritated with the tendency of manufacturers to send 'outwork' to the generally non-unionised villages, especially when they faced the threat of a strike.¹⁴³ As the secretary of the local NUBSRF complained in 1882, in the event of a strike, shoemakers in Northampton were 'heavily handicapped' because they lived in 'the centre of the greatest Boot and Shoe Manufacturing district in England'. Employers, he continued, 'tell their men if they don't like the wage which they offer, they can send their work into the country and get it done'.¹⁴⁴

Although this sense of hostility was less apparent in shoemakers' attitudes towards female workers, they still articulated a highly gendered conception of the working classes by using terms, such as the 'workmen' and 'the men', in their literature and during their political discussions.¹⁴⁵ In his memoirs, James Hawker used terms such as 'working man', 'Hard-working men' and 'Good Honest Workmen' interchangeably with broader phrases such as the 'working class of England'.¹⁴⁶ Despite the large numbers of women and girls employed in the shoe trade, gendered discourse also pervaded the monthly reports of the NUBSRF.¹⁴⁷ At times, the union's male leaders made their attitudes to women even more explicit. It was very common, for example, for NUBSRF monthly reports to include jokes that poked fun

¹³⁹ Saxton, *Recollections of William Arnold*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, p. 2.

¹⁴¹ M. Dickie, 'The Ideology of Northampton Labour Party in the Inter-war Years', (unpublished MA dissertation, Warwick 1982), pp. 2; 13.

¹⁴² Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 79.

¹⁴³ Howarth, 'The Liberal Revival in Northamptonshire', p. 81; Dickie, 'The Ideology of Northampton Labour Party', p. 4; Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁴ NUBSRF MR, December 1882, MRC 547/P/1/3.

¹⁴⁵ For examples, see *NM*, 3 November 1877; 21 February 1880; 13 November 1880.

¹⁴⁶ Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, pp. 78; 91; 101; 103. Hawker wrote these memoirs retrospectively in 1904.

¹⁴⁷ NUBSRF MR, September 1877, MRC 547/P/1/1; NUBSRF MR, May 1881, MRC 547/P/1/3; Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, pp. 14; 21; Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, p. 101: Female employment was particularly marked in the 'closing' process after the introduction of the sewing machine in the 1850s. The NUBSRF admitted women members in 1884. B. Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London, 1984), p. 143; Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 45.

at wives, daughters, and mothers.¹⁴⁸ In May 1881, NUBSRF leaders even decided to include an extract from 'Work and the Workmen', written by the economist and poet J. K. Ingram, in that month's report. The extracts stated that 'woman, first as wife, secondly as mother, is the centre of the home'. Women, it claimed, must be liberated from the necessity of wage labour so that they could pursue their domestic roles without hindrance or distraction.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps tellingly, NUBSRF leaders included the extract without comment.

Xenophobic sentiments also pervaded the political discourse of working-class radical activists in Northampton.¹⁵⁰ During this period, it was typical for local workers to exalt the distinctive virtues of the English working man, such as in 1880 when, at an NUBSRF meeting, one activist proudly contrasted the moderation of the working men of England with the rebellious spirit exhibited by their foreign brethren. The English worker, he contended, only ever demanded what was 'just and right...nothing more and nothing less'.¹⁵¹ This nationalistic sense of superiority was especially strong amongst local shoemakers, who often insisted that their boots and shoes were of a far higher quality than those manufactured in other countries. As an NUBSRF report stated bluntly in 1877, the skill of the British workmen was 'vastly superior to all Foreign importations'.¹⁵² George Odger received applause for expressing similar views at a meeting of the town's shoemakers in 1872, and, in particular, for claiming that the footwear produced by English workmen was of a higher class than that produced by 'Continental'.¹⁵³ While they were expressed less frequently than in Bristol, nationalistic sentiments still formed an integral part of working-class radical identity in Northampton.

The restrictive nature of this identity was also apparent in the way local activists discussed the unemployed. As in Bristol, they tended to marginalise those who, they believed, did not truly belong to the genuine section of the

¹⁴⁸ For example: 'A young gentleman from the "rural districts," who advertised for a wife through the newspapers, received answers from eighteen husbands informing him he could have theirs'. NUBSRF MR, January 1879; April 1879; May 1879, MRC 547/P/1/2.

¹⁴⁹ NUBSRF MR, May 1881, MRC 547/P/1/3. According to Sarah Boston, this attitude 'dominated the policies of the early trade union movement'. Boston, *Women Workers*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵⁰ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 18. Attitudes towards foreign workers amongst radicals in Northampton are, admittedly, harder to detect, largely because the question of foreign immigration rarely featured in local trade union discussions. This was because the inrush of immigrants into the local boot and shoe industry was not, at this time, a major problem. It was more of a problem in London, Manchester and Leeds.

¹⁵¹ *NM*, 6 March 1880.

¹⁵² NUBSRF MR, October 1877, MRC 547/P/1/1.

¹⁵³ *NM*, 3 February 1872. There were even suggestions of a competition between English and French shoemakers. *NM*, 18 January 1873.

unemployed.¹⁵⁴ This was certainly true of local shoemakers, who, owing to the seasonal nature of their trade, had come to accept temporary periods of unemployment as a natural and cyclical occurrence.¹⁵⁵ The secretary of the local NUBSRF branch regularly complained of the depressed condition of the trade throughout this period, and despaired that workers had to leave the union as a result of having no work.¹⁵⁶ For local trade unionists, those who had lost their job in this manner deserved the moral sympathy and financial support of their fellow workers. This was not the case, though, for the long-term unemployed. James Hawker neatly summarised this attitude in his memoirs. Members of his class had, he argued, frequently demonstrated their sense of fairness by sharing what they earned 'with the *worst*', or, to be more precise, the section of the unemployed who had 'no right to move with Honest, Hard-working men' of England.¹⁵⁷

As well as offering a useful insight into the working-class radical political identity, James Hawker's memoirs also provide a succinct description of working-class radical ideology. In contrast to Bristol, where it was largely synonymous with a decidedly working-class movement, the term 'radical' in Northampton was the ideological description of choice for both working-class and middle-class activists. Yet, while they emphasised the same core concepts, and although they drew upon a shared political discourse, these two sets of activists offered markedly different interpretations of what these concepts meant. On the one hand, middle-class radicals gave the core radical concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty strong populist meanings by associating them with cross-class notions such as 'the people', 'the community', and 'the industrious'. On the other hand, working-class radicals like Hawker tended to add class inflections to these concepts and to their associated demands. For example, when discussing democracy, they not only emphasised the struggles between 'the people' and 'the idle classes', but also the political imbalances between the working classes and the middle- and upper-classes. Moreover, like their counterparts in Bristol, they also associated the expansion of democracy with the principle of labour representation, a demand that began to produce tensions within the local radical movement in the years before 1885. It would be erroneous, therefore, to regard radicalism in Northampton as an intra-class

¹⁵⁴ Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 286-288.

¹⁵⁵ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 56.

¹⁵⁶ NUBSRF MR, December 1877; January 1878; June 1878; September 1878; December 1878, MRC 547/P/1/1; NUBSRF MR, May 1879; July 1879, MRC 547/P/1/2. However, by May 1881, he reported that trade was 'good'. NUBSRF MR, May 1881, MRC 547/P/1/3.

¹⁵⁷ Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, p. 101.

movement in which ideological distinctions were absent. Rather, it was a political alliance composed of two distinct sections whose members offered their own distinctive and, at times, conflicting interpretations of radical ideology.

At a basic programmatic level, radicals of all classes in Northampton largely accepted the political programme advocated by Charles Bradlaugh, which called for, amongst other things, the disestablishment of the Church of England, Home Rule for Ireland, strong and effective trade unions, the reform of the land laws, and the abolition of the hereditary principle in legislation.¹⁵⁸ Yet, despite sharing a commitment to these individual proposals, working-class and middle-class radicals disagreed about the true meaning of radicalism's underlying concepts. This was particularly true for the concepts of democracy and constitutionalism. Again, while all radicals emphasised the importance of democratic principles in their political appeals, it was far more common for working-class radicals to associate the concept with labour representation.¹⁵⁹ At this stage, they did not wish to put forward a parliamentary candidate of their own, largely because their focus was on Bradlaugh's struggles in the 1880s, but they did support the principle at a local level. This was, firstly, because they believed that working men were better able to represent their class on governing bodies, and, secondly, because they felt that the working classes, due to their numerical superiority, had as much right to political representation as any other class. Supporters of Thomas Roberts, who stood as a labour candidate for the School Board during this period, justified his candidature in these terms. Sitting members of the Board, one supporter argued, did not think about the working classes as much as they should, whereas Roberts, who was himself an active trade unionist, would understand the needs of the 'working-men'.¹⁶⁰ In their view, political institutions were only truly democratic if they contained direct representatives from all sections, or classes, of the community.¹⁶¹

This class-based understanding of political representation was at odds with the dominant view amongst local middle-class radicals and liberals, who believed

¹⁵⁸ Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics*, p. 4. The senior MP for Northampton after 1880, Henry Labouchère, offered a broadly similar programme. See H. Pearson, *Labby: the life and character of Henry Labouchère* (London, 1948), pp. 158-167; Taylor, *Lords of Misrule*, p. 119; 'To the Electors of the Borough of Northampton', NCL 198-781/9/1880. For local expressions of support for this programme, see *NM*, 11 January 1873.

¹⁵⁹ Frederick Covington, a leading radical, condemned the 'old Whiggery of Northampton' for opposing 'Democratic principles'. He also described Bradlaugh as the 'Champion of Democracy'. *NM*, 21 February 1880.

¹⁶⁰ *NM*, 6 January 1883.

¹⁶¹ There was, for example, a large amount of sympathy with George Odger's candidature in Southwark in 1870, principally because Odger was a shoemaker. *NM*, 19 February 1870.

that sympathetic members from any class could ably represent the values and the feelings of the working classes. At the 1874 School Board election, for example, one leading liberal suggested that every man who worked, whether by hand or by brain, was a working man. If people used this definition, and accepted that every Liberal candidate at that year's elections was a working man, then, he argued, there was no need for working men to put forward a candidate of their own.¹⁶² Thomas Adams, a master baker, made a similar argument five years later, when he suggested that the Radical Association, of which he was a leading member, should select their representatives from the class who had 'raised themselves a little above the position at which they started in life'.¹⁶³ Even when Radical and Liberal organisations did select working-class candidates, their leaders often admitted that did so for entirely pragmatic and electoral reasons. As one leading liberal confessed in 1883, the LRU had selected a labour candidate for the School Board elections simply because he was a working man, and they hoped that selecting him would help to placate those voters who wished to put a member of 'their own class' on the School Board.¹⁶⁴

These contrasting interpretations of democracy caused tensions within the radical movement. From the early 1870s onwards, individual trade union societies began to put forward candidates at School Board elections, often without the sanction or support of local Liberal or Radical organisations.¹⁶⁵ Even when they did not stand their own candidates, trade unionists were still active in opposing certain radicals who, they believed, were unworthy of working-class support. Primarily, their opposition to these candidatures emanated from a class-based understanding of political representation. For working-class radicals, any candidate who sought to represent the working classes should ideally be a member of that class, or, if not, they should at least have demonstrated their sympathy with this class through their actions. Judging the suitability of political candidates in this way inevitably involved examining their industrial activities, an endeavour that angered a number of leading figures within the radical movement.¹⁶⁶ In the 1870s, for example, an 'advanced section of the Radicals' opposed certain radical manufacturers who, they argued, had dissatisfied trade unionists by reducing their wages.¹⁶⁷ In the 1880s, as we have seen,

¹⁶² *NM*, 10 January 1874.

¹⁶³ *NM*, 20 September 1879.

¹⁶⁴ *NM*, 6 January 1883.

¹⁶⁵ *NM*, 7 January 1871; 27 December 1873; 10 January 1874; 9 December 1882.

¹⁶⁶ For an example of these tensions, see a discussion among members of the Radical Association in 1879. *NM*, 16 August 1879.

¹⁶⁷ *NM*, 25 October 1873; 31 October 1874.

trade unionists organised campaigns to oppose the municipal candidatures of prominent employers who, they argued, were guilty of 'robbing the Workmen' and of placing 'the proceeds in [their] already well-filled pocket[s]'.¹⁶⁸ For working-class radicals, and much to chagrin of their middle-class leaders, the wages question was intimately tied up with questions of a more overtly political nature.

Again, while they shared a strong belief in the concepts of constitutionalism, rights, and liberty, working-class and middle-class radical activists often gave these concepts contrasting meanings. Middle-class activists such as Thomas Purser, who argued that radicals were the 'true pioneers of liberty', offered the most explicit definitions of radical ideology throughout this period.¹⁶⁹ Ambiguous conceptions of rights and liberty also featured prominently in the election campaigns of Charles Bradlaugh.¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, working-class radicals, such as the shoemaker James Hawker, gave these concepts more exclusivist meanings. Throughout his memoirs, Hawker used a number of expressions that could be considered populist in tone. For instance, he praised Bradlaugh as one the 'Greatest, most fearless of Democrats' because he was a 'Poacher on the Privileges of the rich Class', a class that had stolen 'the land from the People' and who had 'poached upon' its liberty. Hawker also claimed that he was a 'Constitutionalist' who would willingly submit to the majority if only 'the people' had had a voice in the making of the law. While middle-class radicals would not have disagreed with these statements, Hawker often went beyond the boundaries of the populist interpretation of radicalism. For instance, he not only expressed bitterness towards the 'Game-preserving Class', but also to 'all other Employers' who had impoverished 'the People'.¹⁷¹ Like other trade unionists in Northampton, he used a language of rights and liberty when discussing the relations between employers and workers.¹⁷² Furthermore, he argued that the 'Working Men' should 'Send their Own Class to Rule' so as to 'Watch [their] Own Interests'. Despite claiming that he never left Bradlaugh politically, Hawker in fact articulated a class-inflected understanding of radical ideology that differed not only from mainstream liberalism, but also from the version of radicalism promoted by

¹⁶⁸ 'To Trade Unionists and Non-Unionists', NCL 198-781/9/1880.

¹⁶⁹ *NM*, 24 April 1875; 25 October 1895.

¹⁷⁰ *NM*, 14 December 1878: Bradlaugh claimed to want 'constitutional government by and for the people'. See also *NM*, 9 July 1881; 'Bradlaugh and Liberty! Constitutional Song', NCL 198-781/9/1880; 'Fellow-Workmen and Electors of Northampton', NCL 198-781/9/1882.

¹⁷¹ Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, pp. 1; 23; 25; 62; 73; 76; 95.

¹⁷² Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, 95. For other examples, see NUBSRF MR, November 1877, MRC 547/P/1/1; NUBSRF MR, October 1879; MRC 547/P/1/2; *NM*, 21 February 1880; 6 March 1880; 'To Trade Unionists and Non-Unionists', NCL 198-781/9/1880.

middle-class radical leaders.¹⁷³ These ideological and political differences within the radical movement would prove to have long-term consequences for popular politics in Northampton.

2.3 Summary

The heterogeneous composition of the Northampton radical movement was just one of a number of ways in which it differed from the Bristol example. Whereas radicals in Bristol primarily concerned themselves with the question of labour representation, the struggle to overcome the inadequacies of the Liberal party in Northampton largely found its expression in the struggles of Charles Bradlaugh. Working-class radicals in Northampton, though, were not merely bystanders in local political life. A distinctive working-class variant of radicalism existed as an active current within local politics despite its failure to manifest itself in an independent organisational form. There were also significant variations in the success rate of the two movements. Radical attempts in Bristol to transform the Liberal party into a body composed of all sections of the community ultimately failed. This failure moulded the political strategy of the local radical movement and its activists went on to form class-exclusive, independent organisations. In Northampton, on the other hand, working-class and middle-class radicals continued to work together in a broad but fragile alliance even after the achievement of their primary goal. As we shall see, these experiences would go on to shape the subsequent development of popular politics in both these constituencies.

The similarities between the two movements, however, far outweighed their differences. First, working-class radicals in both constituencies exhibited a strong sense of disillusionment with the unrepresentative nature of local Liberal parties. By continuing to navigate towards these parties, radical activists essentially remained critical members of what they conceived to be the broad Liberal party. Second, and more significantly for this study, working-class radicals in Bristol and Northampton articulated a broadly similar understanding of class and the social order. Contrary to the liberal revisionist interpretation of this period, these activists emphasised the distinctive traits and interests of the 'working classes', and frequently drew attention to the political and economic inequalities that existed between different sections of the community. Their strong sense of class was also exclusivist in tone and was informed by a range of restrictive notions about gender, place, nationality, and work.

¹⁷³ Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, pp. 13; 23.

In particular, working-class radicals considered themselves to be the spokespersons of the hard-working British workman, an independent and politically conscious being who was distinct from the agricultural labourer, the female worker, the foreign labourer, and the undeserving section of the unemployed. This exclusivist sense of class, though, was not synonymous with an adversarial understanding of class relations. Working-class radicals in these constituencies frequently distanced themselves from the politics of class conflict, and, instead, expressed their wish to see conciliation and negotiation between members of different classes. This was, then, a non-conflictual sense of class, which, whilst far from inclusive, was not antagonistic in tone.

Finally, working-class radicals in both Bristol and Northampton offered similar interpretations of radical ideology. Whereas middle-class radicals gave radicalism's core concepts populist meanings, working-class radicals provided them with far narrower meanings. Thus, they interpreted democracy in class terms and advocated a range of democratic demands that, they believed, would enhance the political and economic power of the working classes. They demonstrated a strong sense of loyalty to the English constitution, but they believed that the class imbalances in political and economic life had subverted its true meaning. They also identified the concepts of rights and liberty not only with non-class themes, such as civil and religious liberty, but also with the rights of the working classes, the interests of labour, and the liberties of trade unionists. Therefore, in Bristol and Northampton, a dynamic working-class political tradition, which had its own distinctive and thoroughly class-based identity, language, and ideology, existed long before the revival of socialism and the rise of 'New Unionism' in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

3: The Emergence of Labour Politics, 1885-1889

At the monthly meeting of the Northampton Liberal and Radical Union (LRU) in July 1888, Town Councillor Henry Love introduced a discussion on the programme of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). After Love ran through the demands put forward by this relatively new organisation, audience members asked him to explain in more detail the proposals relating to nationalisation, the payment of Members of Parliament, and state-financed education. Confusion and a sense of curiosity characterised the audience's response to the lecture, and those in attendance agreed to continue the discussion at a later date. In concluding his remarks, Love offered a personal view of the SDF's programme. It was, he asserted, 'Radical to the backbone'. If this was a fair representation of socialism, then, for Love, it was nothing more than 'extreme Radicalism'.¹

The revival of socialism in the mid-1880s encouraged progressives in a number of constituencies throughout Britain to engage in similar ideological discussions.² As well as raising questions about the enduring relevance of radicalism as a political ideology, the emergence of socialist organisations also threatened to destabilise the organisational configuration of progressive politics at a local level.³ In some Liberal areas, including Bristol, Liberal Associations began to face electoral challenges from new socialist and/or independent labour organisations that had been established by former radical activists.⁴ In other areas, such as Northampton, organisational splits were less sharp, and the majority of working-class radical activists remained critical but loyal members of broad-based Liberal organisations.⁵ Moreover, many of these activists began to use the term 'labour' to describe their organisations, their political outlooks, and their ideological perspectives. Yet, in

¹ *NM*, 14 July 1888.

² Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 89; A. Briggs, 'Introduction', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923* (London, 1971), p. 2.

³ For example, in Nottingham West, Northumberland, and Burnley. See J. Owen, 'Dissident Missionaries? Re-Narrating the Political Strategy of the Social-Democratic Federation', *Labour History Review*, 73/2 (2008), p. 193; Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, p. 155; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 209.

⁴ For examples, see Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 364; Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, pp. 33; 47.

⁵ This was also the case in areas as diverse as Battersea, Leicester, and Sheffield. See C. Wrigley, 'Liberals and the Desire for Working-Class Representation in Battersea, 1886-1922', in K. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), p. 126; Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, pp. 118-121; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 226-227; Cherry, *Doing Different?*, p. 41.

Bristol and Northampton, this development did not represent the dawn of a new political landscape or a sharp juncture in local political history. Rather, the 'labour parties' that emerged in these constituencies during the 1880s, whether in an embryonic or an actual form, simply adopted the strategies, the conceptions of class, and the ideological perspectives that had long defined local traditions of working-class radicalism.

This chapter draws upon the examples of Bristol and Northampton to challenge the dominant historiographical interpretations of popular politics in this period. It contests the traditional or 'three-stage' interpretation by questioning the extent to which developments during the 1880s represented major political discontinuities. For proponents of this view, this decade witnessed significant political and social departures, such as the revival of socialism and the onset of deep material changes, which all contributed to shifting the nature of popular political life.⁶ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, for example, suggested that the propaganda of the revitalised socialist movement helped to transform the political and social views of British trade unionists and assisted in eradicating the pessimism and moderation of the British working class.⁷ Conversely, this chapter contends that, far from containing within it the seed of a new political landscape, early labour politics in Bristol and Northampton remained heavily influenced by older political traditions. In these constituencies, most of those within the local 'labour parties' rejected the revived doctrines of socialism and stood aloof from newly formed socialist organisations such as the SDF. Instead, they demonstrated a stubborn sense of attachment to older strategies and ideas that proved to be entirely relevant for the problems faced by the newly renamed 'labour' activists of the 1880s.

Radical continuities within early labour politics were evident in other ways. For example, labour activists continued to use the exclusivist language of class that had informed working-class radical discourse in the 1870s. Even though they continued to speak of 'the people', they still provided this term with a more exclusivist meaning by interchanging it with class-specific terms such as the working

⁶ For examples, see Webb and Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*; Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 9; Harrison, *Before the Socialists*, p. 3; Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 89; 93; 97; Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, p. 200; Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, p. 3; Kirk, *Change, continuity and class: Labour in British society, 1850-1920*, p. 14.

⁷ Webb and Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 374-377; 387.

classes.⁸ There were also continuities in an ideological sense. Throughout the 1880s, former radical activists began to exhibit what G. D. H. Cole described as an 'advanced Radicalism with certain marked collectivist tendencies'.⁹ Since the term 'radical' began to fade from local political discourse during this period, it is helpful, for the sake of clarity, to describe this ideology as 'labourism'. In doing so, it is important to state that labourism was, in its conceptual framework, little different from working-class radicalism. The concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty, which, as the previous chapter demonstrated, had formed the core of working-class radical ideology, remained central within the ideological morphology of labourism, while adjacent concepts, such as class, continued to provide these core concepts with distinctive meanings.¹⁰ The transition from working-class radicalism to labourism was essentially a rhetorical move rather than one reflecting a significant transformation in progressive thought.

Thus, in Bristol and Northampton, the labour activist of the 1880s continued to exhibit a strong sense of loyalty to the English constitution whilst seeking to fulfil what he (not, yet, she) perceived to be its core representative principles. He continued to associate democracy with the struggle of the working classes for a fairer share of political representation and, more particularly, with the principle of increased labour representation, which he began to demand more assertively during this decade. He also continued to articulate the concepts of rights and liberty in strong class terms by emphasising the rights of labour and the liberties of trade unionists. Of course, this is not to suggest that the labourist programme of the 1880s was indistinguishable from those adopted by radicals in the 1870s. By 1889, labour activists in Bristol, Northampton, and elsewhere had begun to see the positive potential of state intervention and had begun to believe, for example, that the state should provide work for the unemployed. This programmatic evolution, though, did not represent a socialist conversion of the labour movement, during which labour activists abandoned what the Webbs described as a 'complacent quietism' in favour of a new 'buoyant faith'.¹¹ In conceptual terms, it simply marked the elevation of a new concept, the state, to a more prominent position within the morphology of

⁸ A. Briggs, 'The Language of 'Mass' and 'Masses' in Nineteenth-Century England', in D. E. Martin and D. Rubinstein (eds.), *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays presented to John Saville* (London, 1979), p. 73.

⁹ Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 81. See also Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 70.

¹⁰ Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 77-82.

¹¹ Webb and Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 374-377; 387.

labourist ideology, which subsequently altered the meanings of its core concepts.¹² The core conceptual architecture of working-class radical ideology survived and remained relevant in the face of new political and ideological developments.

While the case studies of Bristol and Northampton shed further light on continuities between radicalism and the labour tradition, they also question the narrative of continuity as described by Eugenio Biagini, Alastair Reid, and others within liberal revisionist tradition.¹³ For these scholars, the revived socialist politics of the 1880s was firmly rooted in older populist radical traditions.¹⁴ Moreover, for Biagini and Reid, this radical tradition, within which political actors of all social backgrounds had worked relatively co-operatively and harmoniously, remained politically and intellectually appropriate for progressive activists in the 1880s.¹⁵ This chapter, on the other hand, argues that early labour politics in Bristol and Northampton did not tap the political and ideological resources of a populist radical tradition, but rather those of a decidedly working-class variant of radicalism whose activists had long exhibited a strong and exclusivist sense of class.¹⁶ Like working-class radicals before them, labour activists extolled the virtues of the British, employed, urban-based, and male section of the working classes. When they discussed political and industrial questions, they gave precedence to the demands of their class and emphasised the uniqueness and separateness of its members' lives and experiences. At the same time, their view of class relations remained conciliatory in tone. The majority of labour activists refused to embrace those theories that encouraged class warfare and instead continued to believe that they could assist in rebalancing the political and industrial order through peaceful reform. By adopting this non-conflictual view of class relations, and by continuing to articulate a restrictive class identity and a class-accented ideology, labour activists in Bristol and

¹² Michael Freeden suggests that concepts may 'gravitate from a more central to a marginal position, or vice versa' in an ideology's morphology due to 'accumulate changes' or 'cataclysmic events in the non-ideational environment'. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 78.

¹³ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 5; Joyce, *Visions of the People*; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*.

¹⁴ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 75. Non-liberal revisionists have also convincingly demonstrated the continuities between an independent radical tradition and early socialist politics. For examples, see Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 4; Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain', pp. 163-186; Bevir, 'Republicanism, Socialism, and Democracy in Britain', pp. 351-368.

¹⁵ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, pp. 4; 17-18. See also P. Thane, 'Labour and local politics: radicalism, democracy and social reform, 1880-1914', in E. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 253.

¹⁶ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 4; Thane, 'Labour and local politics', p. 260; Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 75. Willard Wolfe argued that British socialists 'tap[ped] the moral and political resources' of the radical tradition. See Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 19.

Northampton simply confirmed the ongoing relevance of the working-class radical tradition.

3.1 Bristol

In mid-1885, working-class radicals in Bristol who had grown disillusioned with the local Liberal party decided to form a Labour League for the purpose of achieving one central objective: the direct representation of labour on local and national governing bodies.¹⁷ For an early historian of the Bristol labour movement, this put the city 'early in the van' of the labour representation movement in Britain.¹⁸ However, the formation of the Labour League, and the emergence of labour politics more generally, did not represent a significant departure in Bristol's political history. Rather, it was merely another attempt by local trade unionists to direct working-class frustration with the Liberal party into productive and semi-autonomous political channels. As we have seen, working-class political movements led by and composed of trade unionists had existed in the city long before the mid-1880s. These movements too had grown out of a sense of frustration with the local Liberal party and, in particular, the attitude of its leadership to the principle of labour representation. In this sense, the emergence of a self-described 'labour' politics in Bristol represented little more than another phase in a long-running and unresolved political struggle.

The radical heritage of the Labour League was apparent in its early political strategy. Like its radical predecessors, the League's primary stated objective was the direct representation of labour.¹⁹ Again like their predecessors, the League's activists principally directed their anger towards the local Liberal party and, more specifically, to those whom they felt had abandoned the party's historical traditions.²⁰ At the 1886 general election, for example, the League put forward J. D. Marshall, a prominent local radical activist, against Lewis Fry, the Liberal MP for Bristol North who had 'violated the trust reposed in him' by opposing Home Rule for Ireland.²¹ The League also challenged the Liberals at a municipal level. In 1886, it put forward a municipal candidate against the Liberal Mayor who, as one activist explained, had

¹⁷ BTC M, 5 March 1885, BRO 32080/TC1/2A; Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades' Council*, p. 5; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁸ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 24.

¹⁹ BTC M, 5 March 1885; 14 February 1889, BRO 32080/TC1/2A; Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades' Council*, p. 5; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 32-33.

²⁰ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 33; 40; *BM*, 4 November 1886; 15 September 1887; 18 October 1887.

²¹ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades' Council*, p. 6; *BM*, 10 June 1886; 19 June 1886; 9 July 1886: Marshall eventually withdrew due to financial difficulties.

failed to record his votes 'for the benefit of the working-classes'.²² A year later, the League challenged the seats of three sitting Liberal councillors, one of whom had been involved in an industrial dispute with his employees.²³ In fact, in the six municipal election contests fought by the Labour League between November 1885 and November 1888, every one of its candidates faced Liberal opposition.²⁴

Yet, despite challenging the local Liberals electorally, labour activists also continued the radical tradition of expressing sympathy with the historical traditions and the leading personalities of the Liberal party. During the Labour League's parliamentary campaign of 1886, activists consistently praised Gladstone's efforts on the Irish question, with one activist going so far as to demand that the first qualification of any labour candidate should be whether they supported Gladstone and his Home Rule Bill.²⁵ An ongoing sense of attachment to the liberal tradition, if not to the local Liberal party, was also evident during municipal contests, where the League's candidates put forward proposals that they considered to be only marginally different from those of their Liberal opponents.²⁶ Indeed, at times, the political differences between liberal and labour candidates became so slight that the *Bristol Mercury* refused to characterise the contests as party fights at all.²⁷ Even Robert Tovey, who, in 1887, became the first labour councillor in Bristol's history, admitted during his election campaign that he was nothing other than a 'consistent Liberal'.²⁸

In some respects, the Labour League did differ from the local radical organisations that had existed during the 1870s. The most novel feature of the League was the involvement of the previously 'non-political' Bristol Trades' Council.²⁹ Before 1885, most trades' council delegates had been openly radical or liberal in their sympathies, but had always refused to commit the council, as a body, to any particular political organisation.³⁰ In mid-1885, the reorganisation of Bristol into four

²² *BM*, 5 October 1886.

²³ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 39; *BM*, 15 September 1887; 18 October 1887.

²⁴ Large, *The Municipal Government of Bristol*, p. 10; *BM*, 18 October 1887; *WDP*, 2 November 1888; 6 November 1888.

²⁵ *BM*, 9 June 1886.

²⁶ *WDP*, 20 October 1888; 30 October 1888.

²⁷ *BM*, 2 November 1886.

²⁸ *BM*, 29 September 1887.

²⁹ 'Non-political' often meant non-party political, rather than non-political in its broadest sense. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, p. 208.

³⁰ As in other urban centres at this time, the trades' council was composed primarily of craft-based trade union branches representing, for example, builders, plasterers, masons, brush makers, shipwrights, shoemakers, and carpenters and joiners. In the mid-1880s, delegates sent a letter of congratulations to Gladstone on his 'great Irish Land Bill', attended a number of demonstrations

separate constituencies and the subsequent increase in local parliamentary representation convinced delegates that now was 'the most opportune time' to enter the political arena.³¹ Still, while this development marked a new phase in the history of the trades' council as a body, it did not represent a sharp break with older traditions for most of its delegates. As we have seen, many trades' council delegates had been politically active in the radical movement, and had campaigned for direct labour representation semi-independently of the Liberal party, from at least 1870. For these delegates, the Labour League was simply a new and potentially more effective vehicle for achieving their long-held political and industrial goals.

Unfortunately for these activists, the formative history of the Labour League was largely a story of electoral failure. The League's experiences in the late 1880s, however, are of historical interest because they neatly demonstrate the strategic continuities between mid-Victorian radicalism and early labour politics in Bristol. Continuities between these traditions are visible in the way labour activists articulated their understanding of class and class relations. Like their radical precursors, they frequently conveyed an exclusivist sense of class in their political and industrial appeals. In these appeals, they emphasised the unique virtues and experiences of the working classes, or, more specifically, its male, urban, British and regularly employed subsection. Moreover, during election contests, they spoke directly and exclusively to working men voters, who they encouraged to 'stick to their own class' when casting their votes.³² At the same time, they also continued to distance themselves from the politics of class struggle. While oppositional class language became more common amongst some former radical activists, most notably amongst those who established the Bristol Socialist Society (BSS) in 1884, the overwhelming majority of labour activists in Bristol remained committed to the working-class radical model of society, which acknowledged class distinctions but

organised by the local Liberals, and provided a 'soiree' for the Liberal ex-Mayor of Bristol. Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, pp. 3; 5; 6-7; *WDP*, 12 December 1878; *BM*, 30 January 1880; 31 March 1880; 17 August 1881; 10 October 1884; 28 November 1884; 3 March 1886; *BTC M*, 4 May 1882, BRO 32080/TC1/2A; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 13; A. Clinton, *The trade union rank and file: Trades councils in Britain, 1900-40* (Manchester, 1977), p. 12; Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 212; NUBSRF MR, June 1887; September 1888, MRC 547/P/1/6.

³¹ This was the view of Alfred Harris, president of the trades' council. *BM*, 27 June 1885. For trade unionists making similar arguments, see *BM*, 1 June 1885; Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 5; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 32-33; Letter 'George Belsen' to *WDP*, 2 January 1885. The redistribution of seats in 1885 encouraged labour activists in other constituencies to demand parliamentary labour representation. For example, see Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 29. After the redistribution of seats, eighty-five seats were dominated by working-class voters. Pugh, *Speak For Britain!*, p. 35.

³² *BM*, 18 February 1886; 30 October 1888.

rejected class conflict.³³

This conception of class and class relations pervaded the early literature of the Labour League as well as the political language of its leading activists. It also gave the League a distinctive political identity, which served to distinguish it from other political formations in Bristol at this time. The exclusivist aspect of this identity revealed itself in late 1886 when members of the League engaged in a heated public discussion with activists from the Operative Liberals' Association (OLA), an organisation that, despite claiming to be composed of working men, contained within it a number of middle-class activists.³⁴ In the aftermath of the 1886 municipal elections, the League's supporters reportedly condemned the OLA for consisting of employers and for not being 'genuine working men' in the sense that they were.³⁵ After an OLA member confessed that this was, indeed, the case, members of the League inundated the *Bristol Mercury* with characteristically class-based critiques of the organisation.³⁶ For example, Robert Tovey denounced the OLA and its leaders for supporting wealthy men who obtained their riches by paying low wages.³⁷ For Tovey, the OLA deserved criticism, not because of its political principles, but because of its broad and inclusive social composition.³⁸

The class composition of the OLA was in marked contrast to that of the Labour League, which, like its radical precursors, was composed entirely of trade unionists. The decision to form the League had emanated from members of the trades' council, who subsequently took the leading positions on the League's executive body and who enshrined a number of class-exclusivist objects into the organisation's rulebook.³⁹ For instance, they restricted membership of the organisation to those who worked for weekly wages and prohibited those who were 'superior in social position to working men' from standing as election candidates.⁴⁰ This emphasis on class exclusivity also characterised the League's early literature, which was intended primarily for the city's working-class population. The League

³³ The BSS grew out of the local branch of the Democratic Federation. Initially a branch of the SDF, it affiliated to the Socialist Union due to the acceptance of Conservative money by three SDF candidates in 1885. It eventually re-affiliated to the SDF. Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 18-21.

³⁴ *BM*, 18 April 1868; 10 June 1886; *WDP*, 1 May 1890.

³⁵ *BM*, 7 August 1886; 18 November 1886.

³⁶ Letter 'Operative' to *BM*, 19 November 1886.

³⁷ Letter 'R. G. Tovey' to *BM*, 23 November 1886.

³⁸ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 33.

³⁹ As the shoemaker John Gregory admitted, the League was a 'child of the Trades Council'. *BM*, 19 March 1886. See also *BM*, 27 June 1885; BTC M, 5 March 1885, BRO 32080/TC1/2A.

⁴⁰ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 33; *BM*, 4 October 1886: While the League accepted financial donations from non-members, they did not allow them to have a vote on important matters affecting the League. *BM*, 15 July 1886.

addressed its first circular, for example, to the 'toilers of the town'.⁴¹ A pamphlet produced in 1886, which stated that the League worked for the 'moral and material recognition of the dignity of labour' and for recognition of 'the nobleness of the labourer', was just as narrow in its appeal.⁴² The League's municipal candidates, who directed their appeals exclusively towards working men voters, also used similar language.⁴³ As Samuel Pritchett explained during his campaign in 1888, 'he was there to fight the battle in the interest of his own class'.⁴⁴

The sectarian understanding of class that had pervaded radical discourse in the 1870s thus continued to pervade the political language of labour activists in the 1880s. This conception of class remained firmly wedded to a range of restrictive assumptions about gender, nationality, place, and work. At times, the marginalisation of other categories of worker, most notably women, was a deliberate act on the part of male labour activists. The male-dominated Labour League rejected early suggestions to allow women to join and limited its membership to the 'working man' who worked 'by the sweat of his brow ... for himself and family'.⁴⁵ On other occasions, male labour activists merely implied that women did not belong in their political organisations.⁴⁶ In their speeches and discussions, they frequently used broad terms, such as 'working classes', alongside gendered descriptions such as 'working men'.⁴⁷ Even during municipal contests, in which a number of women could vote, labour candidates tended to aim their appeals towards working men voters. For example, while women voters made up ten percent of the electorate in the St. Paul's ward in 1886, Robert Tovey and his supporters addressed only the 'gentlemen' and the 'working men' of the ward during their campaign meetings.⁴⁸

Labour activists' conception of class also remained deeply nationalistic and, at times, 'racialist' in tone.⁴⁹ Bristol's position as a major port, and the prevalence of

⁴¹ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 5; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 32-33.

⁴² Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 37-38.

⁴³ For examples, see *BM*, 26 October 1886; 16 October 1888; 19 October 1888; 30 October 1888.

⁴⁴ *BM*, 13 October 1888. For other examples, see *BM*, 27 May 1886; 30 October 1888.

⁴⁵ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 33; Letter 'True Democrat' to *BM*, 9 June 1886. See also Letter 'A Man' to *WDP*, 20 August 1885.

⁴⁶ Hunt, 'Fractured universality', p. 65.

⁴⁷ There are numerous examples of this. See *WDP*, 6 March 1886; *BM*, 27 May 1886; 30 October 1888.

⁴⁸ There were 210 women voters out of 2,049 on the electoral register for this ward. *BM*, 26 October 1886; 2 November 1886; *WDP*, 26 October 1886.

⁴⁹ To some extent, this challenges Cunningham's view that 'the transference of the language of patriotism from the radicals to the right' occurred in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Cunningham, 'The language of patriotism', p. 75.

sailors within the city, played a large role in shaping these attitudes.⁵⁰ When trades' council delegates organised demonstrations to garner sympathy for unemployed sailors in the mid-1880s, it was primarily foreign sailors aboard British ships, rather than the shipowners, that came in for criticism. As a captain from the coasting trade complained in 1886, British seamen were being forced out of their trade by 'the foreigner who was content to take a smaller wage and a lower diet'.⁵¹ Other speakers advocated, amongst other things, protection against the employment of 'foreigners' on ships and an amendment to the Merchant Shipping Act that would force shipowners to give preference to British seamen.⁵² Attitudes towards certain sections of the unemployed also remained far from inclusive. Throughout the 1880s, both the trades' council and the Labour League advised the City Council to provide relief to the unemployed, and argued that only representatives of the working classes could, and should, administer the relief.⁵³ Yet, while they worked strenuously on behalf of those who wanted work, they differentiated between the 'better class' of 'bona-fide working men' and those, presumably, undeserving of relief.⁵⁴ Trade unionists criticised the churches for failing to make this distinction. In a letter to the *Western Daily Press* in 1886, one activist complained that 'a great portion of the recipients [of church-distributed relief] are not *bonâ fide* working men...but a lot of inveterate loafers who do nothing else...but solicit charity and sponge on the working classes'. By requiring applicants to produce a reference from his or her previous employer, the writer argued that they would soon find out who the genuine unemployed really were.⁵⁵

Labour activists in Bristol also continued to draw a sharp distinction between urban and rural workers. Although they celebrated the enfranchisement of rural labourers in 1884, and while they acknowledged the event's importance in the formation of the Labour League, they continued to believe that the lives, conditions,

⁵⁰ Laura Tabili has argued that a 'racial division of labour and a racial hierarchy prevailed aboard British ships'. Tabili, *We ask for British Justice*, pp. 41-43.

⁵¹ According to J. P. May, the association of the Chinese with cheap labour was widespread at this time. J. P. May, 'The Chinese in Britain, 1860-1914', in C. Holmes (ed.), *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society* (London, 1978), pp. 112-113.

⁵² *BM*, 27 April 1886; 28 April 1886. For nationalistic sentiments amongst British workers and socialists during this period, see Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 20-21.

⁵³ Trade unionists in Bristol formed an Unemployed Registration Committee in 1888. JG, File 1, UBSC DM/1741/1. For similar sentiments see *BM*, 25 February 1886; Letter 'Labour League' to *BM*, 28 October 1886.

⁵⁴ JG, File 1, UBSC DM/741/1; *WDP*, 5 March 1886; *BM*, 12 March 1886; 1 December 1887.

⁵⁵ Letter 'George Macnara' to *WDP*, 20 March 1886: Emphasis in original.

and experiences of urban and rural workers were essentially different.⁵⁶ A Labour League circular from 1885, for example, urged Bristol's workers to fraternise with the newly enfranchised rural labourers, but clearly distinguished between 'the long neglected Tillers of the Soil' and 'the toilers of the town'.⁵⁷ At times, labour activists combined these implicit suggestions of difference with outright expressions of hostility. More specifically, they still considered rural labourers to be a threat to their own industrial position, especially during periods of economic depression and severe unemployment. As a consequence, trades' council delegates took a great interest in state-aided emigration as a solution to these problems and passed a number of resolutions in its favour.⁵⁸ For one delegate, emigration would ensure that rural labourers 'could be intercepted' before they reached towns and cities, and would, he believed, protect the status of the urban worker.⁵⁹

The Labour League did not, therefore, claim to speak for the working classes in a broad sense, but rather for the male, British, and urban-based working man. While they prioritised the claims of this group, and although they formed class-based organisations for this purpose, labour activists also continued to distance themselves from the politics of class conflict. Like radical activists in the 1870s, they accepted that different sections of the community had particular interests, but rejected claims that this inevitably led to open class warfare. This explains why local trade unionists tended to criticise only those employers who acted in an unjust manner towards their workers. Moreover, it explains why they continued to praise those who treated their workers well and those who displayed 'courtesy' to trade union representatives during discussions.⁶⁰ As the secretary of the local NUBSRF branch stated in 1885, 'if all employers treated their workmen in a manner similar to Mr. Steadman [an employer] ... little would remain to cause any serious complaint'.⁶¹ This conciliatory view of class relations strongly influenced the attitude of Labour League activists, most of whom were trade unionists themselves. In 1886, for instance, the League produced a pamphlet that claimed that while labour activists prioritised the cause of the 'working man', they did not do so out of a 'spirit of revenge against the upper

⁵⁶ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ Large and Whitfield, *Bristol Trades Council*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ BTC M, 27 May 1886, BRO 32080/TC1/2A: It also organised public meetings on the subject. See *BM*, 16 April 1886; 19 December 1887.

⁵⁹ *BM*, 19 December 1887.

⁶⁰ NUBSRF MR, February 1885, MRC 547/P/1/5.

⁶¹ NUBSRF MR, September 1885, MRC 547/P/1/5.

classes'.⁶² For the League's activists, emphasising the interests of one class was not synonymous with advocating class war. As Robert Gilliard explained in a letter to the *Bristol Mercury*, the Labour League wished to 'protect the legitimate interests of labour' whilst also seeking the 'reconciliation of ... capital and labour'.⁶³

This conciliatory understanding of class relations shaped the dominant ideology amongst local labour activists in the 1880s. In conceptual terms, there were only minor differences between this ideology, which could be called 'labourism', and the ideology of the 1870s Bristol radical movement. The ideological core of labourism was composed of the same concepts that had formed the core of working-class radicalism, namely, democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty. Consequently, labour activists continued to see increased labour representation as a way to resolve the class imbalances in political representation. They continued to display a sense of loyalty to the English constitution, which they believed had endowed them and their class with certain political and economic rights. They continued to work for the removal of unjust legislation that they believed had subverted the rights and liberties of the working classes. During the 1880s, labourist programmes also became noticeably collectivist in tone, especially in comparison to those adopted by their radical predecessors. However, while labour activists began to display an increasing interest in using the state to attain a number of their objectives, this did not represent a conceptual departure from the framework of working-class radical ideology.⁶⁴ For these activists, collectivist solutions were deemed as means through which to achieve long-held goals, not as ends in themselves. Thus, while their programmes may have changed during the 1880s, the conceptual structure of their thinking did not.⁶⁵

The concept of democracy in particular remained important for labour activists in Bristol. Throughout the 1880s, they advocated a wide range of democratic proposals, such as the expansion of voting rights to all adults, the payment of MPs, and the abolition of property qualifications in local government.⁶⁶ They also continued to associate democracy with the principle of labour representation. Again,

⁶² Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 37-38.

⁶³ Letter 'Robert S. Gilliard' to *BM*, 17 June 1886. For similar sentiments, see Letter 'R. S. G.' to *BM*, 5 February 1886; R. G. Tovey, *The Dock Question; or, the Way the money goes: Being a paper read before the Trades Council* (Bristol, 1886), pp. 1-9.

⁶⁴ As Willard Wolfe noted, 'the development of collectivism ... had become an established pattern of British history by the 1880s'. Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 81.

⁶⁶ These were included on a list of questions sent from the Labour League to the parliamentary candidates in 1885. Published in *BM*, 13 November 1885.

as with their radical predecessors, they did not advocate this principle as a way to subvert the existing social order, but as a way to make nominally democratic bodies more representative of the class-based social order. This proportionate understanding of representation, which viewed each class as being entitled to a proportional share of political power, featured prominently in labour discourse at this time. For example, in 1886, Robert Gilliard of the Labour League suggested that the reconciliation of capital and labour could be achieved 'by the one being represented as fairly as the other in our Parliament'.⁶⁷ Similarly, Samuel Pritchett, a municipal candidate for the League in 1888, argued that his organisation campaigned for labour representation because they believed that 'all classes had a right to be represented'.⁶⁸ For labour activists in Bristol, prioritising the objective of labour representation was necessary because working men, despite their numerical dominance in society, were underrepresented on local and national governing bodies. Dan Irving, at this time a self-described 'Liberal working-man', neatly summarised this understanding of democracy in a letter to the *Bristol Mercury* in 1888:

'You [a Mercury journalist] say you recognise the full right of working-men to seats on all public bodies, but you argue that they have no better right than any other class. Now were it a fact, that at the present time all classes were fairly represented, this would undoubtedly be true, but when we know that ... working-men are conspicuous on all public boards, mainly by their absence therefrom ... then we do claim, until representation has been more equally divided, that working-men have a prior claim, all other things being equal'.⁶⁹

This sense of political exclusion shaped labour activists' understanding of rights and liberty. In political terms, they believed that each class 'had as much right as any other class' to political representation.⁷⁰ As a consequence, they argued that existing political organisations, such as the Liberal party, had failed to give due recognition to 'the rights of labour' because they had overlooked the demand for

⁶⁷ Letter 'Robert S. Gilliard' to *BM*, 17 June 1886. See also Tovey in *BM*, 21 January 1887.

⁶⁸ *WDP*, 20 October 1888.

⁶⁹ Letter 'D. Irving' to *BM*, 30 October 1888.

⁷⁰ *BM*, 29 March 1886: This was the view of the secretary of the trades' council.

labour representation.⁷¹ Labour activists also sought to remove obstacles that prevented working men from obtaining what they perceived to be their political rights. George Belsten of the NUBSRF advocated the abolition of property qualifications for government representation because it was a clear example of 'class monopoly'. Robert Weare, who worked at a local Schweppes factory during this period, agreed with Belsten and implored 'the democracy' to remove these 'unjust privileges' that denied working men the right to political representation.⁷² Furthermore, the notions of 'rights', 'fairness' and 'justice' continued to feature in trade unionist discussions about 'tyrannical' employers. In 1886, Belsten characterised the arrest of three local shoemakers as a 'gross miscarriage of justice', especially, he argued, as it took place in a country that 'boasted so much of liberty'.⁷³ In the same year, John Parsons condemned the Docks Committee for reducing the wages of dock labourers, as he believed it was a 'dangerous curtailment of the rights of labour'.⁷⁴ By continuing to associate the concept of rights with industrial questions and the rights of labour, labour activists demonstrated a clear commitment to old radical idioms and motifs.⁷⁵

They also remained unswerving in their commitment to the constitutionalist strategy of their radical ancestors. As John Fox of the Labour League confirmed in 1886, they wished to achieve their goals in a 'legitimate, legal manner'. Even when some activists spoke favourably of revolution, they interpreted this term in a thoroughly reformist sense. For one activist, revolution was a process of change that 'they were going to accomplish by such organisations as the Labour League' in a 'determined and peaceful and not in a violent manner'.⁷⁶ This faith in the viability of peaceful political action stemmed from a positive and democratic reading of the English constitution. Labour activists continued to believe that, despite defects in the way it functioned, the constitution granted certain political and industrial rights to all men. Accordingly, they directed their campaigns against what they considered to be its abuses or subversions, rather than against the constitution itself. For example, they condemned property qualifications for local government candidates, not because it revealed the fundamentally undemocratic nature of the constitution, but

⁷¹ Letter 'George Belsen' to *WDP*, 2 January 1885. See also *BM*, 30 October 1888.

⁷² *BM*, 9 August 1886. See also *BM*, 8 March 1886; W. W. Young, *Robert Weare of Bristol, Liverpool and Wallasey, born: 1858, died: 1920: an appreciation, and four of his essays* (Manchester, 1921), p. 9.

⁷³ NUBSRF MR, January 1886, MRC 547/P/1/5.

⁷⁴ *BM*, 27 May 1886. See also Letter 'Robert G. Tovey, Sec. Bristol Trades' Council' to *BM*, 3 May 1888.

⁷⁵ Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 147.

⁷⁶ *BM*, 18 March 1886.

because it contradicted the representative principles at the heart of constitution.⁷⁷ Similarly, while one labour activist accepted that many of the existing laws were wrong, he argued that, 'by such organisations as the League and direct labour representation', working men in Bristol had 'the means of setting them right'.⁷⁸ In this view, labour representation would, as Dan Irving wrote in 1888, assist in 'adjusting the wrongs and injustice that at present existed between classes'.⁷⁹ By making political institutions more representative of society as a whole, it would help to realise one of the core principles that underlie the English constitution: the 'representation of the people for the people by the people'.⁸⁰

Labourism thus inherited the core conceptual framework of working-class radical ideology. During the 1880s, though, a new concept - the state - began to emerge within its internal morphology.⁸¹ Labour activists in Bristol increasingly began to consider the state as an effective instrument that could be used to achieve a number of their long-held goals. Initially, they limited their statist ambitions to the local sphere, demanding, for example, that the City Council open public works schemes and that they municipalise local monopolies.⁸² As the decade progressed, they also began to see national-level state action as a solution to the problem of unemployment, which was particularly severe in Bristol at this time.⁸³ At demonstrations of the unemployed, speeches by members of the newly formed BSS, who advocated a range of state-based policies to deal with the question, received loud applause from those assembled.⁸⁴ By 1888, the trades' council, which was by no means dominated by avowed socialists, had come to accept a universal, parliamentary-enforced eight-hour day as a cure for unemployment.⁸⁵

The collectivist tone of these proposals, though, did not represent a sharp ideological juncture during which socialism replaced older and outdated ideas within

⁷⁷ *BM*, 9 August 1886.

⁷⁸ *BM*, 18 March 1886

⁷⁹ Letter 'D. Irving' to *BM*, 30 October 1888; *BM*, 18 March 1886.

⁸⁰ *BM*, 9 August 1886: George Belsten used this expression. Robert Tovey also claimed that the 'government of the people by the people' was the Labour League's core 'principle'. *BM*, 30 October 1888.

⁸¹ Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 78.

⁸² Bristol trade unionists demanded these solutions at a relatively early date, which challenge's Clinton's view that unemployment was 'not a matter in which [trades' councils] took an interest' prior to 1890. *BM*, 24 January 1880; 29 January 1880; 19 February 1886; 19 October 1887; 20 December 1887; Clinton, *The trade union rank and file*, p. 35.

⁸³ In 1886, Belsten of the trades' council claimed that there was 'more distress...in the city...than for several winters past'. The Mayor agreed, predicting that the unemployed numbered ten percent 'over and above the general number unemployed at that time of year'. *WDP*, 5 March 1886; 6 March 1886.

⁸⁴ *BM*, 25 February 1886; 12 March 1886; 5 April 1886; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 18; 24; 35; 39-42; BTC M, 1 March 1888, BRO 32080/TC1/2A.

⁸⁵ BTC M, 1 March 1888, BRO 32080/TC1/2A.

the labour movement.⁸⁶ While relations between labour and socialist organisations were relatively cordial in Bristol during this period, there remained clear organisational and ideological distinctions between them.⁸⁷ Robert Gilliard, the organising secretary of the Labour League, was adamant that there was no connection between the BSS and the League. Despite the presence of a small number of socialists within the League, Gilliard maintained that socialism was never advocated and rarely spoken of at its meetings.⁸⁸ In any case, suggesting that the socialist revival of the 1880s represented a sharp turning point in popular politics disregards both the heterogeneity of early British socialism, as well as the strong ideological debt it owed to older forms of radicalism.⁸⁹ At this time, the BSS was far from an ideologically monolithic body. As Sally Mullen has noted, individual members of the BSS interpreted socialism in quite different ways, emphasising variously a 'love of humanity', an adherence to the Marxist conception of class conflict, or an enduring belief in the 'non-conformist notions of duty, self-respect and righteousness'.⁹⁰ Indeed, except for their commitment to the collective ownership of the means of production, which distinguished the BSS from other political formations in Bristol at this time, the early policy pronouncements of the BSS closely resembled the working-class radical programmes of the 1870s.⁹¹

More importantly, labour activists' advocacy of statist proposals did not fundamentally alter the conceptual framework of their pre-existing ideology. The cluster of concepts that had defined working-class radicalism in the 1870s remained at the core of this ideology, as did adjacent concepts such as class. The emergence of a new concept within this ideology, far from representing a transformation into socialism, which, it should be noted, had a rather different internal arrangement of core and adjacent concepts, merely served to provide its core concepts with

⁸⁶ Webb and Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 374-377; 387.

⁸⁷ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 212.

⁸⁸ *BM*, 17 June 1886. Some years later, Gilliard argued that 'all the actual work of the League fell' on members of the BSS. Young, *Robert Weare*, p. 24.

⁸⁹ For the radical roots of the SDF, see Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain', pp. 163-186; Bevir, 'Republicanism, Socialism, and Democracy in Britain', pp. 351-368; Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation', p. 219.

⁹⁰ S. Mullen, 'The Bristol Socialist Society 1885-1914', in I. Bild (ed.), *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol, 1983), p. 36; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, pp. 19-20.

⁹¹ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 1*, p. 29: The old radical rallying cries of adult suffrage, the payment of MPs, nationalisation of the land, and free unsectarian education all featured in BSS programmes. BSS interest in radical traditions was also evident in their songs and poems, for which the local movement became renowned. Mullen, 'The Bristol Socialist Society', p. 37; 'Labour Songs' compiled by the Bristol Socialist Society, BRO 37886/2/1/3; JG, File 1, UBSC DM/741/1.

different meanings.⁹² For example, labour activists came to believe that one of the 'rights of labour', the right of working men to employment, could now be secured through the action of the local and national state apparatus. As John Fox of the trades' council argued in 1886, men wanted work, not charity.⁹³ The Labour League's Samuel Pritchett refused to believe that working men would want to go 'to the upper classes for help (hear, hear)'. Anyone willing to work, he asserted, should have a 'right to live', and should not have to go begging to the 'squire or parson'.⁹⁴ This growing belief that the state should provide work for the unemployed thus altered the meaning of the old radical concept of rights. By demonstrating its adaptability in the face of new political and intellectual developments, this concept, as well as the other concepts that had formed the core of working-class radical ideology, remained entirely appropriate and relevant for a new generation of progressive political activists in Bristol.

3.2 Northampton

Unlike their counterparts in Bristol, who formed labour organisations outside of the Liberal party, labour activists in Northampton continued to work within the broad-based Liberal and Radical Union (LRU) during the 1880s. In a number of respects, this LRU-labour alliance was simply an updated version of the cross-class radical coalition of the 1870s. It too had a broad social composition, an internally fragile nature, and a middle-class leadership that was largely successful at maintaining unity between its different sections. In addition, it too was not an internally harmonious movement in which class tensions were absent. Internal frictions frequently threatened to rupture the alliance, especially when members of the 'labour party', a descriptive term that came to be used increasingly by activists, politicians, and local journalists throughout this period, began to demand direct labour representation on municipal bodies. In this sense, the LRU-labour alliance was, like its radical predecessor, a pragmatic political arrangement between two class-based components, both of which had their own priorities, values, and demands.

By continuing to offer support to this alliance, those within the emerging labour party in Northampton demonstrated their commitment to the conciliatory strategy adopted by their working-class radical predecessors. Labour activists' faith in

⁹² Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 78; 82.

⁹³ *WDP*, 5 March 1886.

⁹⁴ *BM*, 25 February 1886.

this strategy survived the arrival of socialist politics in the town in the mid-1880s.⁹⁵ While a number of prominent trade unionist activists quickly joined the local branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) upon its formation in 1886, the majority continued to navigate towards the broad-based organisations of radical-liberalism. For instance, when a group of activists formed a Labour Representation League in 1886, they committed their organisation to working within, rather than outside, the existing machinery of the LRU.⁹⁶ This loyalty to the LRU-labour alliance also endured the bitter experience of a lockout in the boot and shoe trade, which, in 1887, pitted politically radical trade unionists against politically radical shoe manufacturers.⁹⁷ The events that surrounded this dispute, and, in particular, the town council's decision to call out the police, convinced local NUBSRF members to stand their own candidates at the following year's municipal elections. Once again, though, they sought to achieve this goal by working alongside the LRU.⁹⁸ In the weeks prior to the election, NUBSRF activists attended LRU candidate selection meetings to put forward the names of their chosen nominees and to justify their intervention in the political arena. The validity of their strategy seemed to be confirmed in September 1888, when ward meetings of the LRU resolved to sanction the nominees of the NUBSRF: Daniel Stanton, a shoemaker and executive member of the LRU, and Fred Inwood, the president of the recently formed trades' council.⁹⁹

While the candidatures of Stanton and Inwood confirm the endurance of a conciliatory strategy among local trade unionists, they also help to draw out the class-based tensions that underpinned the LRU-labour alliance. For example, in the days following their selection, the *Northampton Mercury* reported that a heated discussion took place within the LRU about the desirability of standing trade union candidates. Summarising the discussion, the editor of the *Mercury* wrote that an influential section of the LRU viewed the candidatures as 'untimely' and 'unfortunate', primarily because they feared that radical-liberal shoe manufacturers

⁹⁵ The SDF began to send speakers from London to the town in 1886. *NM*, 12 June 1886; 10 July 1886; 24 July 1886; 12 March 1887.

⁹⁶ *NM*, 11 September 1886.

⁹⁷ For details of the dispute, which Fox saw as a 'great turning-point of Union fortunes in Northampton', see Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, pp. 101-104. See also NUBSRF MR, November 1887; December 1887; January 1888, MRC 547/P/1/6.

⁹⁸ *NM*, 1 October 1887; 15 September 1888.

⁹⁹ The local trades' council, formed in 1888, was initially dominated by the local branch of the NUBSRF. The council's first president was also the president of the local NUBSRF branch, and six delegates from the society attended early trades' council meetings. Delegates at the first meeting of the trades' council also represented the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, the Typographical Society, as well as branches representing coach makers, bricklayers, carpenters, engineers, cordwainers, and painters. *NM*, 15 September 1888; 29 December 1888; 16 February 1889; 23 February 1889.

would withhold their support in light of the recent trade dispute.¹⁰⁰ This was the attitude of the chairman and vice-chairman of the LRU, who jointly claimed that the decision to run Stanton and Inwood was nothing more than a retaliatory action against the manufacturers by 'overweening, ambitious men, whose only object [was] to promote their own advancement'.¹⁰¹ For the vice-chairman of the LRU, it was tantamount to a 'declaration of war' against radical-liberal shoe manufacturers in the town. On the other hand, the *Mercury's* editor wrote that those in favour of the labour candidates wished to 'enkindle the enthusiasm' of working-class voters who had become alienated from the liberal and radical cause. The politics of class was certainly evident in the language of the labour candidates and their supporters. In defending his political intervention at an LRU meeting, Stanton implored the 'middle classes' to work alongside the 'working men' who 'had been true' to them in past struggles. 'Would the middle classes be satisfied', he asked, 'if they were in the position of the working men now?'¹⁰²

Both Stanton and Inwood were defeated, the latter by an 'Independent Radical' shoe manufacturer, and the *Mercury* blamed their losses on the division that their candidatures caused.¹⁰³ Still, this experience was significant in the history of popular politics in Northampton. First, while they encountered resistance from certain sections of the LRU, trade unionists came to believe that the organisation could be reoriented in a labour direction. Second, and more importantly for this study, these experiences draw attention to the frictions that continued to exist between working-class and middle-class progressive activists in Northampton. The LRU-labour alliance was not a populist movement in which class distinctions were ignored or denied, but a pragmatic political alliance between two disparate sections, which, despite sharing a number of common objectives, often engaged in bitter arguments.¹⁰⁴ As the previous chapter demonstrated, there was nothing particularly novel about the fragility of this progressive alliance. Yet, by 1889, the working-class section of this alliance had become so distinctive that, despite forming just one component within it, its members, as well as local politicians and writers in the local

¹⁰⁰ *NM*, 29 September 1888. There were also technical issues relating to the power of ward meetings to select candidates.

¹⁰¹ Letter 'J. Gurney and T. Adams' to *NM*, 17 November 1888.

¹⁰² *NM*, 15 September 1888; 29 September 1888.

¹⁰³ *NM*, 3 November 1888: Stanton, on the other hand, blamed a lack of support from the LRU leadership for his defeat.

¹⁰⁴ Particularly in the aftermath of the 1888 elections, when members of the LRU engaged in a war of words through the *NM*. See Letter 'A Few Radicals' to *NM*, 10 November 1888; Letter 'A Sound Radical' to *NM*, 10 November 1888.

press, had begun to describe it as a 'labour party'.¹⁰⁵

Part of the distinctiveness of the local labour party was to be found in the interpretations of class and class relations offered by its leading members. Whereas the middle-class leaders of the LRU held a populist view of social relations and considered 'the people' to be composed of both the middle classes and the working classes, it was far more common for labour activists to draw attention to distinctions within 'the people'. More specifically, they emphasised the superior traits and virtues of the working man and primarily advocated proposals that, they believed, would benefit this section of the community. At the same time, their understanding of class remained non-conflictual in tone. The majority of local labour activists rarely expressed antagonistic attitudes towards employers as a class, even during and after the bitter boot and shoe trade lockout of 1887. Though they began to dispense with the term 'radical', labour activists did not abandon the conception of class that had informed the worldview of their radical predecessors.

It is possible to detect the restrictive nature of this conception of class by examining the way labour activists used terms such as 'the people', which remained a highly contested term in local political discourse during this period.¹⁰⁶ In contrast to their middle-class allies, who used these terms in a populist sense, labour activists tended to give them far narrower meanings by using them alongside less inclusive and more class-specific terms. Examples of this can be found in activists' letters to the *Northampton Mercury*. In 1887, for example, 'Crispinian' associated 'the workers' with the 'masses', and 'the capitalists' with the 'classes'.¹⁰⁷ In the same year, 'Working Man' used the terms 'working men', 'labour', 'masses', 'toilers' and 'people' without distinction.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, T. W. Bishop urged the 'working classes' to protect themselves from 'the other two classes', and asked that the state provide work when the 'capitalists' failed to do so in order that 'the people may support themselves by their labour'.¹⁰⁹ This restrictive interpretation of 'the people' also featured in Daniel Stanton's municipal election campaign in 1888. Proudly describing himself as a 'working man' at an election meeting, Stanton argued that the 'workmen of Northampton' were anxious to have direct representatives on local governing bodies because they had not previously been used 'in the interests of...the masses of the

¹⁰⁵ For examples, see *NM*, 15 September 1888; 13 October 1888; 10 November 1888; 1 December 1888; 12 October 1889; 26 October 1889.

¹⁰⁶ Yeo, 'Language and contestation', pp. 44-64.

¹⁰⁷ Letter 'Crispinian' to *NM*, 10 September 1887.

¹⁰⁸ Letter 'Working Man' to *NM*, 17 September 1887.

¹⁰⁹ Letter 'T. W. Bishop' to *NM*, 22 January 1887: Emphasis added.

people'. 'As one of the people', Stanton felt that he was entitled to demand that the 'working men' be given a voice in the conduct of municipal affairs.¹¹⁰

By continuing to reduce the meaning of 'the people' to this more precise form, activists in the local labour party clearly demonstrated their working-class radical ancestry. Like their working-class radical predecessors, labour leaders also continued to marginalise other categories of worker either by rejecting their requests for assistance or, more frequently, by excluding them from their definition of the working classes. Their sense of class, therefore, remained highly restrictive, and they tended to prioritise the concerns not of the working classes in its broadest sense, but rather the subsection of male, British, urban and employed workers. For labour activists in Northampton, this subsection had particular attributes, including diligence and industriousness. The very names of contributors to the *Northampton Mercury* correspondence pages, such as 'One of the Working Class', 'a working ratepayer', and 'The Very Hard Working Man', demonstrate both workers' pride in and acknowledgement of their social status.¹¹¹ Letter writers also attributed the virtues of honesty, truthfulness, and integrity to their fellow 'working men' and stressed their superior knowledge of their craft and conditions.¹¹² They drew a clear boundary between themselves and those higher in the social scale, who, they believed, failed to understand their lives and conditions.¹¹³ For example, writing in response to the candidature of a self-described 'working man's candidate' in 1886, 'Working Man' questioned the candidate's class credentials because he wore a 'broad black cloth coat and silk top-hat' and because he regularly took 'walks abroad enjoying the flavor [sic] of a large cigar'.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, 'Working Man' was entitled to call himself by this name because, he claimed, he had been 'hard at it for fifty years, as man and boy'.¹¹⁵

Conversely, local workers, and shoemakers in particular, did not apply the notion of hard work to 'tramps' who took advantage of the NUBSRF's travelling allowance to seek employment elsewhere during periods of slackness in the boot and shoe trade. The 'tramping system', as one NUBSRF activist complained, was too open to abuse by 'the worst kind of worker', the 'scab' who exploited the union's

¹¹⁰ *NM*, 15 September 1888: emphasis added.

¹¹¹ Letters to *NM*, 27 June 1885; 5 February 1887; 30 July 1887; 15 June 1889.

¹¹² Letter 'Discriminator' to *NM*, 5 September 1885; Letter 'W.W.' to *NM*, 1 October 1887.

¹¹³ Letter 'Fair Play' to *NM*, 10 September 1887.

¹¹⁴ A picture of Roberts in this outfit was included on his handbill for the election. 'To the Electors of the East Ward', NCL 198-781/9/1886.

¹¹⁵ Letter 'Working Man' to *NM*, 14 August 1886.

benefits system.¹¹⁶ For one local shoemaker, tramps were nothing more than the 'idle and dissolute - men who would not work if they had it'.¹¹⁷ The use of 'men' in this letter also epitomised the male-centric definition of the working classes articulated by labour activists during this period. Leading members of the NUBSRF, despite encouraging their members to unionise the female-dominated machinist and closing sections, continued to use highly gendered language during the 1880s.¹¹⁸ This was especially true for rank and file union members, who rarely considered the status and concerns of women workers at union meetings, and who, during their discussions, often tended to assume that the gender of the shoemaker was male.

Among labour activists, there also remained a sense that workers in the surrounding rural districts were both culturally different and a threat to the urban worker. NUBSRF activists in particular felt threatened by rural-based shoemakers who continued to work outside of centralised factories and workshops.¹¹⁹ For Fred Inwood of the NUBSRF, the 'basket system', whereby manufacturers sent work out to villages due to the cheaper prices and the lack of a trade union presence, was 'detrimental to the workers'.¹²⁰ Indeed, the ready supply of rural-based labour became particularly problematic during the 1887 lockout, when manufacturers scoured the adjacent towns and villages for 'scabs'.¹²¹ While discussions about rural migration were more prevalent than discussions about foreign immigration, nationalistic sentiments still pervaded the verbal and written discourse of labour activists.¹²² For example, in 1885, 'One of the People' wrote to the *Mercury* to object to the formation of a 'Gentlemen's Volunteer Corps' due to the 'startling proposition' that only middle-class members could join. 'Working men', he argued, were just as willing to exhibit their patriotism as any other class, as they had shown by providing the existing corps with volunteers. 'Surely', the writer suggested, 'the artizan [sic] who voluntarily sacrifices his time and money' was just as worthy of fighting for his country as members from any other class.¹²³

¹¹⁶ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, pp. 76-77.

¹¹⁷ Letter 'A Rivetter' to *NM*, 5 May 1883.

¹¹⁸ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 75.

¹¹⁹ NUBSRF CR, 1888, MRC 547/P/1/6; 'The great majority' of rural Northamptonshire's inhabitants were employed in the boot and shoe trade during this period. NUBSRF CR, 1888, MRC 547/P/1/6; NUBSRF MR, March 1885, MRC 547/P/1/5; Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ NUBSRF CR, 1888, MRC 547/P/1/6. The Northampton branch had attempted to organise rural-based shoemakers in 1885. See NUBSRF MR, March 1885, MRC 547/P/1/5.

¹²¹ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 101.

¹²² NUBSRF CR, 1888, MRC 547/P/1/6.

¹²³ Letter 'One of the People' to *NM*, 28 February 1885: The original suggestion was to form a 'corps of bourgeois riflemen'.

This restrictive notion of class was little different from that expressed by working-class radicals in the 1870s. Like their predecessors, labour activists also continued to hold a conciliatory view of class relations. Charles Bradlaugh appealed to this view when he spoke to a well-attended meeting of local trade unionists in 1886. During his lecture, Bradlaugh recognised the equal rights of capital and labour and expressed his hope for their eventual reconciliation.¹²⁴ While he argued that 'the great struggles of the future' would be fought between 'labourers and employers of labour', he explained that these struggles would only be damaging to both if they were based on the idea that 'either has a right or the duty to destroy the other'. Trade unionists, he pleaded, should 'meet capital not in vengeance for the past, but for a good living in the future'.¹²⁵ Significantly, and despite Bradlaugh's claim to speak as a neutral observer of the capital-labour relationship, the secretary of the local NUBSRF branch felt that Bradlaugh's emphasis on class conciliation perfectly encapsulated the 'labour point of view' on the question. Bradlaugh's speech, praised by the NUBSRF secretary as 'one of the grandest and most exhaustive discourses on the subject', was subsequently published by the NUBSRF in pamphlet form.¹²⁶

Other officials in the Northampton NUBSRF branch shared this vision of inter-class harmony. In fact, they attempted to turn this perspective into a reality in 1883 by forming a Board of Conciliation in the town.¹²⁷ The union's executive welcomed the formation of the Board and considered it be an effective medium through which employers and workers could calmly advocate their 'different interests'.¹²⁸ Although this system of arbitration broke down during the 1887 lockout, trade unionists, perhaps surprisingly, continued to express conciliatory sentiments throughout the dispute. In letters to the *Mercury*, those involved in the lockout denied that they held any feelings of animosity or bitterness towards the manufacturers.¹²⁹ The strike committee expressed similar sentiments and argued that they merely wanted employers to act in a 'fair manner' and to cease behaving in a 'despotic mood'.¹³⁰ In a particularly rousing letter in September 1887, 'Crispinian' rejected claims that his union acted out of a sectional class-based interest. The

¹²⁴ NUBSRF MR, January 1886, MRC 547/P/1/5; *NM*, 9 January 1886.

¹²⁵ Transcript of the speech was published in *NM*, 9 January 1886.

¹²⁶ NUBSRF MR, January 1886, MRC 547/P/1/5.

¹²⁷ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 80.

¹²⁸ NUBSRF MR, July 1885, MRC 547/P/1/5.

¹²⁹ Letter 'A Workman' to *NM*, 13 August 1887; Letter 'Laster' to *NM*, 20 August 1887; Letter 'One in Favour of Conciliation' to *NM*, 3 September 1887.

¹³⁰ Letter 'The Workmen's Committee' to *NM*, 13 August 1887.

officials of the union, he explained, had 'as much concern for the well-being of the whole, for what affects the whole would also affect them'. 'Defence, not defiance' was their watchword, and 'justice and fair-play' was their motto.¹³¹

Admittedly, the language used by regular strikers would almost certainly have been less restrained during the lockout than these letters suggest. The *Northampton Mercury* claimed to represent moderate radical-liberal opinion in the town and ultimately desired peace in the staple trade. In fact, when the dispute at one factory escalated into a general lockout, letters from trade unionists became noticeably absent from the paper's correspondence section. There is also evidence to suggest that during periods of economic depression and unemployment, workers were more likely to use hostile language towards individual employers.¹³² More significant for the purpose of this study, however, is the way trade unionists responded politically to the lockout. Despite the bitterness of the dispute, leading activists in the local NUBSRF remained loyal to the cross-class LRU, which, as we have seen, included within its ranks both shoe manufacturers and shoemakers. Furthermore, while the lockout strengthened their desire to achieve political representation for their class, trade unionists rejected claims that they demanded this out of a sense of revenge. Daniel Stanton insisted that it was the action of the magistrates, not the manufacturers, which acted as the catalyst for the NUBSRF's intervention in the political arena. He also accused manufacturers, not workers, of setting 'class against class' by opposing the NUBSRF's demand for labour representation. While acknowledging the different interests of the middle and the working classes, Stanton urged them to work 'shoulder to shoulder' for the cause of progress.¹³³

As well as embracing the working-class radical view of class relations, labour activists in Northampton also adopted the conceptual framework of working-class radical ideology. As in Bristol, the dominant ideology of the local labour party during this period could be best described as labourism. In terms of its core conceptual architecture, this was essentially working-class radicalism in a new guise. Democracy, for example, remained a central concept within labourist ideology. Whilst their middle-class allies tended to offer populist understandings of the concept, labour

¹³¹ Letter 'Crispinian' to *NM*, 10 September 1887.

¹³² NUBSRF MR, June 1885; August 1885, MRC 547/P/1/5; NUBSRF MR, August 1889, MRC 547/P/1/7; Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 80: In justifying the perceived inevitability of fluctuations in the boot and shoe industry, the executive reported that this fact 'appears to be overlooked by our members'.

¹³³ *NM*, 15 September 1888.

activists interpreted democracy in strong class terms and often associated it, to a greater extent than ever before, with direct labour representation. Again, support for this principle emanated from a proportionate and class-based understanding of democracy. For labour activists, political institutions such as the Town Council should represent all sections of the community ideally in proportion to their numerical strength. As the labour party, and the class for which it claimed to speak, formed the largest section of the community, it was entitled to at least some form of representation on local governing bodies. As the president of local NUBSRF branch explained in 1888, the working classes deserved representation on the Council because the 'labour party was ... the strongest body in the town'. The boot-maker Thomas Powell also noted how two-thirds of the electors in some municipal wards were '*bona-fide* working-men', and, this being the case, he believed that they were entitled to at least half the representation. At times, even leaders of the LRU acknowledged the electoral importance of the working-class population. 'The labour party in Northampton', Richard Cleaver argued in 1889, '*was* the Radical party'. 'Their backbone was the working men of Northampton'.¹³⁴

Support for labour representation among labour activists stemmed from a belief that only working-class representatives could truly represent the views of working men. As Fred Inwood told a meeting of LRU members in 1888, it was inevitable that working men would want a representative who knew where 'the shoe pinches'. Daniel Stanton agreed, and provided anecdotal evidence of injustices meted out by local municipal authorities, whose members, he repeated, had never felt 'where the shoe pinched'. Inwood and Stanton thus considered the merits of labour representation entirely from the standpoint of their class and supported it primarily as a way to improve the lives of their fellow working men. For example, during his municipal election campaign, Stanton told a meeting of shoemakers that 'it behoves *us* to obtain positions of power, so that should *we* be supplanted by machinery, it will be possible for *us* to create work, either of an Imperial or Municipal character, so that *we* shall be able to live'.¹³⁵ Stanton's understanding of political representation, as well as that of democracy more generally, was intimately connected to broader questions about class and class interests.

Stanton and other labour activists in Northampton also embraced the constitutionalist ethos of the 1870s radical movement. They were particularly keen

¹³⁴ *NM*, 15 September 1888; 6 October 1888; 2 February 1889: Emphasis added.

¹³⁵ *NM*, 15 September 1888; 29 September 1888; 6 October 1888; 13 October 1888: Emphasis added.

to reiterate their loyalty to the constitutional order after the formation in 1886 of an SDF branch in town. In 1887, for example, the boot-maker and LRU member Thomas Powell proudly asserted that those who visited Northampton often credited the town's inhabitants for 'knowing how to behave themselves'. For Powell, labour activists were the chief defenders of the constitutional order and had no sympathy for those who behaved in an unconstitutional manner. Accordingly, the Town Council's decision to call out the police during the 1887 lockout angered Powell because he feared that it might give his fellow townsmen a reputation for being 'a lot of barbarians', whereas, in fact, they were a community of 'honest industrious working people'. Labour activists also adopted the radical tenet that one should achieve their political and industrial goals through peaceful and lawful political action. Again, this desire to capture or at least to pressurise political institutions stemmed from a firm belief that democratic principles lay at the heart of the constitution. As he believed that the constitution granted the right of political representation to all sections of society, Daniel Stanton justified labour representation as a way for 'the humbler classes' to achieve that portion of political power that, after all, was 'their just rights'. As Powell explained, they did not propose to monopolise political power, they only wanted a 'fair share of representation, nothing more'.¹³⁶

The concepts of rights and liberty also remained at the core of labourist ideology. Once more, labour activists viewed these concepts through the lens of class. For example, they frequently used the notions of 'rights', 'justice', and 'fairness' when discussing matters of an industrial nature. During the 1887 lockout, the secretary of the local NUBSRF branch characterised the employers' position as 'unjust' and claimed that the workers were fighting 'the battle for the rights of their fellow-workmen'.¹³⁷ The strike committee resolved to defeat the 'despotism' of certain employers in the name of 'justice'.¹³⁸ W. George Sykes, writing to the *Northampton Mercury* during the lockout, condemned the 'injustice' and 'great oppression' used against the workers, and claimed that those critical of the union 'don't stand beneath life's pressure'.¹³⁹ As we have seen, labour activists also used a language of rights when discussing political representation and the relative absence

¹³⁶ *NM*, 6 October 1888; 13 October 1888.

¹³⁷ NUBSRF MR, August 1887; September 1887; December 1887, MRC 547/P/1/6.

¹³⁸ Letter 'The Workmen's Committee' to *NM*, 13 August 1887.

¹³⁹ Letter 'W. George Sykes' to *NM*, 3 September 1887. 'Lasters' engaged in a series of processes through which the 'upper' was 'drafted' over the 'last' of the boot or shoe. See Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 10.

of working men on local governing bodies. In fact, a lack of justice was one of the primary justifications given for demanding labour representation on these bodies. With more power, Fred Inwood believed that working men would be able to regulate and administer local institutions, such as the Town Council and the magisterial bench, in a more 'just' manner.¹⁴⁰

Throughout the 1880s, Inwood and other labour leaders in Northampton hoped to achieve their objectives by working within an LRU-labour alliance. From 1886 onwards, this seemingly impregnable alliance came under threat from a newly formed branch of the SDF, whose national leaders considered the town to be fertile ground for socialist activity.¹⁴¹ Yet, while the debates between Charles Bradlaugh and the SDF's Henry Hyndman stimulated local interest in socialism, the SDF failed to convince the majority of labour activists to abandon their faith in old ideas and allegiances.¹⁴² Partly, this was due to the provocative language used by the SDF's early activists. In 1887, for example, one socialist orator informed a local meeting that Bradlaugh was 'the greatest enemy the working men of the country had'.¹⁴³ Tensions between the SDF and the labour party were also rooted in ideological disagreements. The non-socialist majority in the labour party articulated the ideology of labourism, which, as in Bristol, underwent a slight modification during this period. By 1889, local interpretations of this ideology had become increasingly collectivist in tone, and its proponents had begun to consider state-based action as a solution to many of the problems faced by the working classes. Even Daniel Stanton, an exemplar of labourism, came to accept that the state should provide workmen with profitable labour when employers could not.¹⁴⁴

Although labourism underwent a collectivist mutation during the 1880s, this did not represent a socialist conversion of the Northampton labour movement. In conceptual terms, this ideological development involved the elevation of the concept of the state to a more prominent position within labourist morphology, which subsequently altered the meaning of its core concepts. Whereas SDF members saw

¹⁴⁰ *NM*, 27 October 1888. For similar sentiments see *NM*, 1 October 1887; 15 September 1888.

¹⁴¹ M. Dickie, 'Liberals, Radicals and Socialists in Northampton before the Great War', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 8/1 (1983-4), p. 5; Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 60; Owen, 'Dissident Missionaries?', p. 189; Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 104.

¹⁴² D. Lavin, *Bradlaugh contra Marx: Radicalism versus Socialism in the First International* (London, 2011), pp. 29-30.

¹⁴³ *NM*, 24 September 1887: The SDF primarily focused their early attentions on the LRU rather than the Conservatives. Robert Reid, an early leader of the local SDF, claimed that this was because 'he had for many years looked upon Conservatism as dead and obsolete, and he had not thought it worth while to use any breath upon it'. *NM*, 12 March 1887; 8 October 1887.

¹⁴⁴ *NM*, 20 April 1889.

the state as an 'institutional manifestation of the socialist community', labour activists saw it as just one method that they could use to realise their core objectives, such as the defence and expansion of the rights of labour.¹⁴⁵ This explains why labourists such as Stanton frequently expressed their reservations about certain themes discussed in socialist literature and oratory. In particular, they considered the wholesale socialisation of the means of production to be impractical and the class war to be undesirable.¹⁴⁶ At times, their scepticism towards the impractical nature of the SDF's programme manifested itself in a sense of ambivalence rather than in an expression of hostility. For instance, when the executive of the NUBSRF asked its members for their opinion on the question of a parliamentary-enforced eight-hour day, very little interest was shown in Northampton.¹⁴⁷ On other occasions, labour activists offered explicit reasons for rejecting the SDF's proposals. In 1888, Stanton explained that he opposed the nationalisation of the land, the mines, and the railways because they were 'utterly impossible of execution'.¹⁴⁸ In Northampton, there were marked differences between the ideologies of labourism and socialism.

This is not to deny that there were similarities between the labour and socialist *movements*. Local SDF members were more trade union-orientated than their national leaders, which was demonstrated clearly in their active involvement on the trades' council after its formation in 1888.¹⁴⁹ Like labour activists, socialist activists also articulated a highly exclusivist sense of class. During the SDF's first municipal campaign in 1889, for example, their candidate, a shoemaker, advocated representation for his 'own class' because 'a rich man' could not possibly 'represent the poor'.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, like those in the local labour party, SDF members

¹⁴⁵ Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 447.

¹⁴⁶ 'We socialists proclaim a class war': Letter 'A Social Democrat' to *NM*, 9 November 1889. The SDF programme included statist solutions such as the nationalisation of the railways and the land, cumulative taxation above a fixed minimum, free compulsory education with one meal a day, and the establishment of national banks. See *NM*, 12 June 1886; 10 July 1886; 21 August 1886; 12 March 1887; 24 September 1887; 8 October 1887; 21 July 1888; 27 October 1888.

¹⁴⁷ NUBSRF MR, May 1889; July 1889, MRC 547/P/1/7. The *NM* did report that the Northampton branch of the NUBSRF passed a resolution in favour of a parliamentary-enforced eight-hour day, but they did not publish the voting numbers. *NM*, 13 April 1889.

¹⁴⁸ *NM*, 14 July 1888.

¹⁴⁹ This challenges Henry Collins' view that 'the party's attitude to the relationship between trade unionism and the wider political movement for socialism was exactly the same as' Henry Hyndman's. H. Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923* (London, 1971), p. 53. George Green, a bricklayer and member of the SDF, was the vice-president of the trades' council. *NM*, 7 September 1889.

¹⁵⁰ *NM*, 5 October 1889. See also Letter 'A Social Democrat' to *NM*, 9 November 1889; Letter 'A Social Democrat' to *NM*, 16 November 1889. These letters urged workers to use the political power to vote as solidly 'at the polling booths in the interests of their class as they stood unitedly at the great lock-out'.

considered themselves to be the heirs of the radical tradition.¹⁵¹ 'A Social Democrat', writing to the *Mercury* in 1889, portrayed SDF members as 'the only true Radicals' in Northampton. Another member explained that 'True Radicals' and socialists had much in common.¹⁵² This view echoed the sentiments of Annie Besant, who, during a lecture in the town in 1886, described radicals and socialists as 'brothers, not foes'.¹⁵³

Still, the strategic and ideological differences between progressive activists in Northampton, however slight, proved to have important political consequences. Midway between the populist LRU and the socialist SDF stood the labour party, a movement of moderate trade unionist leaders who expressed scepticism towards the unrealistic ideas of the SDF, especially those relating to wide-ranging nationalisation, but remained broadly in agreement with practical policies that featured in all progressive programmes during this period. While these proposals became increasingly statist in tone during the 1880s, this did not represent a fundamental break with their pre-existing ideology. In short, labour activists refused to abandon the conceptual framework of working-class radicalism, and only allowed the concept of the state to alter the meaning of, rather than to displace, the concepts at the core of this framework. Labourism in Northampton, as in Bristol, was the ideological heir of working-class radicalism.

3.3 Summary

Despite the revival of socialism, the emergence of independent labour organisations, and the experiences of intermittent industrial unrest, continuity was the most discernible feature of popular politics in Bristol and Northampton during the 1880s. Contrary to the liberal revisionist interpretation, this was not continuity in a trans-class or populist sense. Rather, this chapter demonstrates that the radical thread that ran through early labour politics in these constituencies was of a decidedly working-class character. Firstly, working-class radical continuities within early labour politics were evident in the political strategies adopted by labour activists. In Bristol, the firmly independent spirit of the 1870s radical movement continued with the formation of a Labour League, which directly challenged the local Liberals for the working-class vote. In Northampton, labour activists continued the conciliatory

¹⁵¹ *NM*, 3 July 1886; 31 July 1886; 11 December 1886; 12 March 1887; 5 November 1887; 13 November 1889.

¹⁵² *NM*, 5 October 1889. Letter 'A Social Democrat' to *NM*, 9 November 1889. See also *NM*, 2 November 1889.

¹⁵³ *NM*, 18 September 1886. Leading LRU members could be just as conciliatory. See *NM*, 14 July 1888; Letter 'A Radical' to *NM*, 19 November 1887. Other leading members of the SDF made similar arguments. See Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, pp. 198; 201; 207.

strategy of their working-class radical predecessors by refusing to form an independent political organisation, and by co-operating with the LRU.

Secondly, the imprint of working-class radicalism was apparent in labour activists' conceptions of class and the social order. Although there were regional variations in these conceptions, labour activists in both constituencies continued to perceive the social order as one composed of three distinct classes - upper, middle, and working - each of which had their own distinctive interests. In their view, the working classes, despite their numerical dominance over other sections of the community, unfairly lacked their due share of political and economic power. Labour activists also continued to conceive of the working classes in narrow terms and tended to exclude rural labourers, women workers, foreign workers, and 'paupers' from their definition of this class. Furthermore, while they prioritised the interests of their class, labour activists also believed that class relations could and should be conducted in a conciliatory manner. They denounced and actively discouraged class conflict and frequently expressed their opposition to theories revolving around the class war. Like their working-class radical predecessors from the 1870s, the labour parties in Bristol and Northampton stood for the interests of the working classes so as to bring about a fairer political and economic balance between different sections of the community.

Thirdly, there were significant discursive continuities between the working-class radical and political labour movements in Bristol and Northampton. Labour activists continued to use a language of class in their verbal and written appeals, which served to distinguish the labour parties from other movements and organisations. Even though, at times, activists used terms such as 'the people', they continued to imbue these terms with class-specific meanings by interchanging them with exclusivist terms, such as 'working men'. Finally, labour activists continued to articulate an ideology that was distinct from both mainstream liberalism and socialism. While former radicals became self-described 'labour' activists during this period, and although many of their demands became increasingly collectivist, this did not represent a sharp rupture in their conceptual thinking. Like working-class radicals in the 1870s, labour activists placed the concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty at the core of their ideology, and, when they discussed these concepts in public, they continued to give them a marked class accent. Although, in response to new political and ideological developments, they began to see the state

as a solution to certain problems faced by their class, this only served to modify the meanings they attached to these core concepts. This was, then, an evolution within rather than against their pre-existing ideology, which, despite undergoing a slight collectivist mutation, remained working-class radicalism in all but name.

4: Industrial Conflict and Labour Politics, 1889-1900

A number of political and industrial developments during the final decade of the nineteenth century proved to be crucial in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. The decade began with the outbreak of a militant strike wave throughout Britain during which previously non-unionised and unskilled workers, such as dockers and gasworkers, forced their employers into making significant concessions.¹ Although the decline of the 'new unions' was almost as rapid as their growth, their militant spirit infected those in the old unions.² Workers in trades such as boot and shoe making and engineering, who also faced the challenges of technical modernisation, engaged in long and bitter disputes with employers' federations in 1895 and 1897 respectively.³ Furthermore, throughout this period, decisions in the courts relating to picketing put the legal position of trade unions under threat.⁴ It was against this backdrop that socialists and trade unionists established local cells of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), an organisation formed in 1893 that would go on to play a significant role in progressive politics over the next three decades.⁵

Trade unionists in Bristol and Northampton played an important role in the industrial conflicts of the 1890s. For this reason, these two constituencies make ideal case studies for examining the political significance of these industrial developments. Although there were marked economic differences between the two constituencies, both case studies can be used to challenge certain arguments associated with the traditional and revisionist interpretations of this period. To begin with, they question the central premise of the traditional or discontinuity interpretation by revealing the existence of significant political, discursive, and ideological continuities within 1890s labour politics. For traditional scholars, changes in the composition, political strategy,

¹ H. Clegg, A. Fox and A. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 1, 1889-1910* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 55; 57; 63; 82; J. Schneer, *Ben Tillet: Portrait of a Labour Leader* (Beckenham, 1982), p. 48.

² Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions: Volume 1*, p. 83. By 1892, membership of the Dockers' Union had fallen by 59%, the Sailors' and Firemen's Union by 66%, and the Gasworkers' Union by 83%.

³ J. E. Cronin, 'Strikes 1870-1914' in C. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1875-1914* (Brighton, 1982), p. 89; Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 113; Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 245; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions: Volume 1*, pp. 164-168.

⁴ Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 110-112.

⁵ Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 1; 283.

and dominant ideology of the trade union movement during this decade represented a sharp and significant turning point in working-class history, which ultimately paved the way for the rise of 'class politics' in modern Britain.⁶ In Bristol and Northampton, however, the industrial conflicts of this decade tended to validate rather than alter the existing political strategies of labour activists. In Bristol, which became a storm centre of new unionism in late 1889, labour activists demonstrated their commitment to old political strategies by forming organisations outside of and against the Liberal party. Similarly, the bitter experience of a lockout in Northampton's dominant industry in 1895 did little to convince the majority of trade unionists in the town to break from their long-standing alliance with middle-class radicals. For labour activists in Bristol and Northampton, old working-class radical strategies remained applicable despite the turbulent events of the 1890s.⁷

Socialist activists played a leading role in both the new unionist strike wave and the boot and shoe trade lockout.⁸ Nevertheless, throughout this decade, there were substantial continuities within labourist ideology in Bristol and Northampton. In short, labourism, with its core concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty, remained the dominant ideology among members of the local labour parties. By the end of the decade, certain developments, such as new unionism and the agitation of Charles Booth on the question of old aged pensions, had brought new ideas into the realm of practicable politics. By embracing many of the demands associated with these developments, labour activists contributed further to the collectivist mutation of their ideology. As in the 1880s, this represented an evolution within their pre-existing ideology rather than a conversion of the labour movement to socialism. In conceptual terms, this period witnessed the further elevation of the

⁶ For examples, see Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, pp. 156-157; Hobsbawm, 'The 'New Unionism' Reconsidered', pp. 15-17; Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 95; I. Taylor, 'Ideology and policy', in C. Cook and I. Taylor, *The Labour Party: An Introduction to its history, structure and politics* (London, 1980), p. 5; Kirk, *Change, continuity and class*, p. 156.

⁷ Labour activists in a range of English constituencies formed new labour organisations during the new unionist strike wave. See J. Clayton, *The Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, 1884-1924* (London, 1926), p. 82; Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, pp. 42-43; 76; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 178-180; Clark, *Colne Valley, Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 17. Lib-Lab sentiments remained particularly strong in London, Leeds, and mining constituencies in both England and Wales during this period. See Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 18; 258; K. Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour: The Welsh Experience, 1885-1929', in K. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), p. 162; Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 119; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 134. For a discussion of the problems encountered by left-wing Liberals in their dealings with the emerging labour parties, see J. R. Moore, 'Progressive Pioneers: Manchester Liberalism, the Independent Labour Party, and Local Politics in the 1890s', *The Historical Journal*, 44/4 (2001), pp. 989-1013.

⁸ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions: Volume 1*, pp. 90-91; 199-202.

concept of the state to a prominent position within labourism's conceptual framework. As the concept of the state moved closer to its ideological core, labourism and its core concepts took on an even stronger collectivist accent. As a result, labourist solutions to a range of economic and social problems became increasingly statist in tone and, by the end of decade, its proponents had begun to favour selective nationalisation, a parliamentary-enforced eight hour day, and a state system of old aged pensions. For labour activists, these solutions were not ends in and of themselves, but merely the most effective means through which to achieve the goals that they had inherited from their working-class radical ancestors.⁹

The case studies of Bristol and Northampton reveal significant continuities within late nineteenth-century labour politics, but they also challenge the narrative of continuity put forward by liberal revisionist scholars. For scholars in this tradition, the developments of the 1890s did not represent the beginning of a distinct new phase in popular political life in which an increasingly class conscious and socialist-inspired working class overcame its previous moderation and docility. Rather, they contend that labour and socialist politics continued to display its populist and plebeian radical heritage by retaining its non class-based focus and ethos.¹⁰ In Bristol and Northampton, though, the political, discursive, and ideological themes that remained relevant for labour activists were far from populist in tone. Indeed, establishing a connection between a decidedly working-class radical tradition and 1890s labour politics makes it far easier to account for the tone and the character of the Bristol and Northampton labour parties during this period. In these constituencies, activists, journalists, and politicians continued to acknowledge the existence of these parties even when actual party organisations failed to emerge. In Bristol, the labour party had a number of independent organisational expressions. In Northampton, it was just one section of a broader political alliance. Still, the labour

⁹ J. E. Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion: War, State and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1991), p. 38; I. Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-1965* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 13. In 1899, one trade union activist in Bristol argued that Booth had 'practically started the agitation on the subject of old age pensions'. *WDP*, 13 March 1899. For similar developments elsewhere during this period, see Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 66. Cronin, however, also argues that there remained 'working-class ambivalence' towards a number of statist policies, such as national insurance, compulsory education, housing schemes, and the poor law. See Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion*, pp. 26; 40; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 7.

¹⁰ For examples, see Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 5; Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 75-84. Non-liberal revisionists have also drawn attention to the continuities between radical and socialist politics. For examples, see Lawrence, 'Popular politics and the limitations of party', p. 83; Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 37; Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism*, pp. 62; 64; 177; Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation', p. 219; Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, pp. 30; 46.

party in Northampton was never fully integrated into a trans-class political movement. As in the previous two decades, it was an unruly element within a pragmatic and fragile alliance of two class-based sections. Though it failed to materialise in an actual form, and despite its continued tactical navigation towards the broad-based organisations of radical-liberalism, the Northampton labour party continued to form a distinctive component in local political life.

During the 1890s, developments in the trade union world changed the composition of labour politics in Bristol and Northampton, but they did not transform labour activists' conception of class and class relations. Even when they attempted to broaden the basis of their organisations, male labour activists still articulated a conception of class that was based firmly on restrictive assumptions about gender, nationality, place, and work.¹¹ Their understanding of class relations also changed very little from the 1870s and 1880s. In their political and industrial appeals, labour activists and candidates frequently emphasised the unique traits, superior experiences, and numerical dominance of the class to which they belonged, whilst also distancing themselves from theories that advocated class warfare. Of course, activists' language could be more hostile towards employers during periods of severe industrial unrest. Yet, even during the strike wave in Bristol and the 'shoe war' in Northampton, conciliatory sentiments far outweighed those of a more antagonistic tone. Rather than condemning employers as a class, labour activists still tended to criticise individual employers and their organisations for acting in a 'tyrannical' or 'unjust' manner. Like their working-class radical ancestors, they also continued to see strike action as undesirable and harmful, and preferred instead to use conciliatory methods, such as Boards of Arbitration, to resolve differences

¹¹ In the 1880s, male trade unions in the textile trade and the boot and shoe industry began to admit women workers. In the 1890s, the unions of tailors, clothiers' operatives, compositors, printers' warehousemen, cigar makers, steel smelters, and even the Cumberland Miners' Union opened its doors to women members. See Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, pp. 29-30; 41. For other examples of exclusivist attitudes to women, see Hannam, "In The Comradeship of the Sexes Lies the Hope of Progress and Social Regeneration", p. 225. For the nationalistic and racial aspects of working-class identity, see J. Benson, *The Working Class in Britain 1850-1939* (Harlow, 1989), p. 151; J. Hyslop, 'The Imperial Working Class Makes Itself 'White': White Labourism in Britain, Australia, and South Africa Before the First World War', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12/4 (1999), pp. 416-418. For the attitudes of trade unionists and socialists to agricultural labourers, see Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the Land'. The reports of the 1891 census caused concern in urban areas about the extent of rural depopulation. M. Freeman (ed.), *The English Rural Poor, 185-1914: Volume 4* (London, 2005), p. 25.

between employers and workers.¹² Class, in a non-adversarial sense, thus continued to shape labour politics in Bristol and Northampton throughout the 1890s.

4.1 Bristol

Bristol became a 'storm centre' of militant trade union activity in the second half of 1889.¹³ In October of that year alone, a newly formed branch of the Gasworkers' Union achieved a wage increase within two days, while the Dockers' Union won an advance in just four.¹⁴ Although the movement largely consisted of formerly unorganised workers, its spirit infected the older unions of shoemakers, cotton-spinners, and tobacco workers.¹⁵ The strike movement, which was composed of old and new, male and female, and skilled and unskilled workers, persevered intermittently for the next four years in the face of employer counter-offensives.¹⁶ After attempts to set up arbitration and conciliation boards, Bristol again became a centre of revolt in 1892.¹⁷ Dockers, gasworkers, shoemakers, and sailors all engaged in large and sometimes violent conflicts, and a dispute in the timber trade between deal-runners and their employers lasted until the spring of 1893.¹⁸ These actions, though, proved to be the 'crest of the new unionist wave'.¹⁹ By the end of the decade, the employers' counter-offensive was complete and membership of the new unions declined quickly. The mass of unskilled workers in Bristol once again fell into non-unionism.²⁰

While previous historians of Bristol labour movement have characterised these developments as representing a turning point in local labour politics, a close examination of the demands and the language of labour activists reveals the existence of substantial continuities with pre-1889 strategies, outlooks, and ideas.²¹ This is not to deny that developments during this period had an important long-term

¹² Not all of the new unions formed in Britain during this period were militant in their tactics. Furthermore, even those that initially were militant quickly adopted a moderate and conciliatory approach to employers. Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions: Volume 1*, p. 93.

¹³ S. Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', pp. 213-214; E. J. Hobsbawm, 'General Labour Unions in Britain, 1889-1914', *The Economic History Review*, 1/2-3 (1949), p. 124; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions: Volume 1*, p. 64.

¹⁵ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 7; BTC M, 21 November 1889, BRO 32080/TC1/2A; NUBSRF MR, November 1889, MRC 547/P/1/7; *BM*, 18 March 1890.

¹⁶ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', pp. 213; 215; Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 51.

¹⁷ B. Atkinson, *Trade Unions in Bristol* (Bristol, 1982), p. 10.

¹⁸ *BM*, 16 November 1892; 12 December 1892; 30 December 1892; Mullen, 'The Bristol Socialist Society', p. 50; Schneer, *Ben Tillett*, p. 80; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 34.

¹⁹ Schneer, *Ben Tillett*, p. 79.

²⁰ Whitfield, 'Trade Unionism in Bristol', pp. 71-73.

²¹ See Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, pp. 50-51; Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 215.

impact on labour politics in Bristol. The rise to prominence of unskilled unions, for example, altered the composition of the trade union movement. To accommodate the growth of the new unions, the trades' council even rewrote its constitution to accommodate 'any class of Labour'.²² Furthermore, during the 1890s, a number of former radical and labour activists 'saw the light' and began to describe themselves as socialists. Alongside their younger colleagues, these activists worked closely with the trades' council in forming new and independent organisations, such as the Bristol and District Trades' Council Labour Electoral Association (BLEA).²³ Yet, while the strike wave had important organisational consequences in Bristol, it did little to alter the overall strategy of the local labour movement. As previous chapters have demonstrated, labour activists and their working-class radical predecessors had already established organisations for the purpose of achieving labour representation long before the new unionist strike wave. Even the closer relationship between socialists and the trades' council did not represent a significant departure in popular politics, as relations between them had been fairly harmonious before 1889. In terms of political strategy, organisations such as the BLEA were simply new manifestations of a strong independent spirit that, in Bristol, had defined both radical and labour politics since the 1870s.

This attachment to an independent political strategy was most apparent during the BLEA's electoral campaigns. The continued hesitancy of the Liberal Federation to adopt trade union candidates, combined with the relative conservatism of local Liberal MPs, strengthened labour activists' belief in organisational independence.²⁴ By this point, and in contrast to their radical ancestors, labour activists had largely abandoned any hope of a reorienting the Liberal party in a labourist direction. As a result, in the lead up to the 1891 municipal elections, the leaders of the BLEA rejected offers for an electoral truce from the Liberal Federation.²⁵ As both major parties had neglected 'the interests of workers', Harold Brabham of the Gasworkers' Union felt that the BLEA were well within their rights of challenging both.²⁶ Activists extended their independent strategy to the

²² BTC AR, 1891, BRO 32080/TC1/4/2; BTC AR, 1891-1892, BRO 32080/TC1/4/3; BTC AR, 1892-1893, BRO 32080/TC1/4/4; *BM*, 6 June 1890; BTC AR, 1891, BRO 32080/TC1/4/2; Rules of Bristol Trades Council, Constitution and Rules (revised) of the Trades' Council, 1894, BRO 32080/TC1/6/3.

²³ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, pp. 6-7; 18; 50; Atkinson, *Trade Unions in Bristol*, p. 7; E. Malos, 'Bristol Women in Action, 1839-1919', in I. Bild (ed.), *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol, 1983), p. 118. Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 10.

²⁴ BTC AR, 1891-1892, BRO 32080/TC1/4/3.

²⁵ *BM*, 4 December 1891; 27 October 1893.

²⁶ Letter 'H. Brabham' to *WDP*, 23 November 1893.

parliamentary sphere.²⁷ During a by-election in Bristol East in 1890, they put forward a labour candidate to challenge Joseph Weston, a Liberal merchant and shipping magnate. The Liberal Federation once again disregarded the demands of the labour party five years later when, ignoring advice from Liberal leaders in London, they adopted William Wills, a large employer, as their candidate for Bristol East.²⁸ Although the Liberals were ultimately successful in these contests, though only just in 1895, there was no desire for rapprochement amongst labour activists.²⁹ Throughout the final years of the 1890s, the BLEA continued to stand independently of the Liberals, but with minimal success.³⁰

The BLEA thus replicated the political strategies of its pre-1889 predecessors. A number of political activists, both within and outside the BLEA, certainly modified their views towards the Liberal party during this period. In 1891, the president of the trades' council, John Fox, admitted that whilst he and some of his colleagues had historically navigated towards the party, 'during the last two or three years all careful observers must have noticed there was a change (hear, hear)'. Furthermore, as the two main parties had 'banded themselves together to oppose the workers and support the capitalist party', Dan Irving decided to leave the Liberal Operatives' Association for the BSS.³¹ However, while the industrial turmoil of 1889-1893 led a number of individuals to shift their political allegiances, it did not transform the strategy of the labour movement as a whole. For the majority of those involved in the trades' council and its political wing, the experiences of these years simply hardened their already-existing attitudes towards the Liberal party and reconfirmed, rather than initiated, their long-held desire for independent labour representation.³²

The industrial struggles of the period also had little impact on labour activists' understanding of class and the social order. Firstly, as before 1889, activists emphasised the unique qualities of the class to which they belonged and directed their political appeals exclusively to working-class voters. Moreover, during their election campaigns, labour candidates continued to insist that, if elected to public office, they would principally serve the interests not of the community at large, but

²⁷ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 26.

²⁸ *BM*, 15 March 1895; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 385. Wills was a member of a wealthy tobacco importing family.

²⁹ Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 386; Pugh, *Speak For Britain!*, p. 45. See Appendix.

³⁰ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', pp. 214-217; D. Large, *Radicalism in Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1981), p. 19.

³¹ *BM*, 12 November 1891; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 9. See also *BM*, 28 November 1892.

³² BTC M, 14 February 1889, 32080/TC1/2A.

of their class. Secondly, labour activists' view of class relations remained conciliatory in tone. What is perhaps surprising given the often-violent nature of the strike wave was the extent to which activists sought to downplay the antagonistic character of their actions. Even when they engaged in industrial conflict, leading trade unionists in Bristol still tended to portray strike action as an unfortunate and damaging method of resolving disagreements between employers and workers. Indeed, they often proclaimed their desire to eradicate strikes entirely by forming arbitration bodies, which they believed would help to establish friendly relations with employers. While they continued to base their model of society on the idea of class division, labour activists in Bristol still rejected what they perceived to be the unnecessary and harmful politics of class struggle.

Class, in this non-conflictual sense, was the distinguishing feature of the BLEA's political appeal. Its activists sought to construct an image of the BLEA as a class-exclusivist organisation that was led by and, they hoped, supported by trade unionists. In its formative years, the BLEA focused its attentions on politicising male trade unionists by drawing attention to the organisation's class basis. For instance, advertisements in trades' council annual reports explained that the BLEA only appealed to 'workers in sympathy with the movement' and to 'the Trade Unionists and Workers of Bristol'.³³ John Fox spoke in similar terms in 1892 when he claimed that the BLEA did not ask for the votes of 'the cultured, the refined, and the educated classes', but those of 'their own classes and their ... fellow workers'.³⁴ 'Each class', he believed, should 'vote for its own candidates'.³⁵ The politics of class also featured in the speeches delivered by BLEA election candidates. John Sharland, standing as a candidate in 1893, stated that he would 'endeavour to serve the class to which he belonged' if elected to the City Council.³⁶ Candidates often explained that their desire to attain political office emanated from a belief that only working men could truly understand the concerns of working-class voters. As the BLEA's Frank Sheppard argued in 1894, 'men who had been brought up in the lap of luxury' could not possibly legislate for those who had been raised in 'the lap of poverty'.³⁷ To represent the working class on political bodies, a candidate needed something other

³³ BTC AR, 1891-1892, BRO 32080/TC1/4/3; BTC BR, 1893-1894, BRO 32080/TC1/4/5.

³⁴ *BM*, 16 January 1892. See also Letter 'John Curle' to *WDP*, 30 October 1893.

³⁵ *WDP*, 12 January 1892.

³⁶ *WDP*, 27 October 1893.

³⁷ *BM*, 22 January 1894.

than education, wealth, or status. For James Vickery of the Gasworkers' Union, the candidate needed 'the practical experience of workers'.³⁸

This strong sense of class continued to shape labour activists' political language. Like their predecessors, they often gave vague terms, such as 'the people' and 'the masses', more restrictive meanings by using them alongside narrower terms, such as 'worker' or 'trade unionist'. For example, in 1890, a report distributed by the local strike committee included a wide array of terms such as 'skilled and unskilled workers', 'brotherhood', 'the workers', 'the people', and 'humanity'.³⁹ John Curle, writing in the 1892 report of the trades' council, similarly implied that the 'toiling masses of the population' were the 'workers of the city'.⁴⁰ Labour activists also used broad and narrow terms interchangeably in their public speeches. At a public meeting in 1894, Frank Sheppard implored 'the people' to abolish the House of Lords, as it was a threat to their liberties. For Sheppard, though, 'the people' meant something other than a trans-class grouping of workers and employers.⁴¹ Instead, 'the people' were 'the thousands who were murdered by long hours' and those who had been 'maimed and crippled for life while at work'. It was *their* duty, he argued, to remove the undemocratic obstacle that had so often prevented 'the people' from getting their rights.⁴²

Despite consistently prioritising the needs and desires of one class, labour activists in Bristol still saw class conflict as both unnecessary and undesirable. Their faith in this conciliatory vision of class relations survived in the face of intense and often-violent industrial unrest. During periods of strike activity, labour activists tended to downplay the militant nature of their activities by presenting strikers' demands in thoroughly moderate terms. In 1891, for instance, W. R. Oxley of the BLEA claimed that trade unionists, whether of the 'old' or 'new' variety, simply wanted to 'secure the best condition and highest value in return for [their] labour'.⁴³ In fact, for many labour leaders in Bristol, including those involved in the new unions, strike action was harmful to both employers and workers. Harold Brabham, a leading member of the 'new' Gasworkers' Union, believed it was a matter of congratulation that the Bristol branch was free from strikes during 1894.⁴⁴ A year later, William

³⁸ *BM*, 12 January 1892.

³⁹ First report of the Strike Committee reprinted in *BM*, 18 March 1890.

⁴⁰ BTC AR, 1891-1892, BRO 32080/TC1/4/3.

⁴¹ Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 11-13.

⁴² *WDP*, 15 January 1894.

⁴³ Letter 'W. R. Oxley' to *WDP*, 8 April 1891.

⁴⁴ GWGL AR, 1894, MRC MSS.192/GL/4/1.

Whitefield of the 'old' Bristol Miners' Association (BMA) considered that trade unions, despite their recent proclivity for militancy, tended to prevent strikes rather than make them.⁴⁵ Of course, at times, language could be more hostile, especially during periods of industrial conflict. Yet, in Bristol, antagonistic sentiments were exceptional rather than predominant throughout the 1890s. Most labour activists accepted the existence of class-based distinctions within society and prioritised the interests of one class, but refused to accept the class war analysis propagated by a number of socialist activists during this period. The object of the labour movement, as one activist explained in 1892, was to 'protect the interests of the workers' and not to 'set class against class'.⁴⁶

As this example demonstrates, 'the workers' gradually began to replace the 'working classes' as a descriptive term in local political discourse. Nevertheless, despite this suggestion of an increasing homogeneity in the working class, labour activists in Bristol continued to define 'the workers' in highly restrictive terms. In short, when male labour leaders spoke of 'the workers' or the 'working class' during the 1890s, they still often meant the male, British, urban and regularly employed worker. Again, this is not to deny that there significant organisational changes during this period. The unprecedented involvement of women workers in the trade union and socialist movement certainly represented a new departure in labour politics. From 1889 onwards, women in Bristol joined a number of new unions, such as the Gasworkers' Union, and began to play a leading role in trade union activities such as strikes, meetings, and demonstrations.⁴⁷ Furthermore, due to the increasing presence of women within the trade union movement, trades' council delegates decided to amend their constitution to allow 'any class of Labour ... male or female' to become affiliated to their organisation.⁴⁸

These developments, though, had only a minor impact on changing the attitudes of male labour activists.⁴⁹ Most continued to use gendered terms, such as 'workmen', 'working-men' or 'the men', in their verbal and written discourse. They

⁴⁵ Letter 'W. Whitefield, Miners' Agent' to *BM*, 12 December 1895.

⁴⁶ Letter 'E.C.S.' to *WDP*, 14 November 1892.

⁴⁷ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 214; *GWGL AR*, 1892, MRC MSS.192/GL/4/1: In 1892, 800 out of 2100 members of the Bristol Gasworkers' Union were women. *BTC AR*, 1891, BRO 32080/TC1/4/2; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 7; Malos, 'Bristol Women in Action', p. 118; *BM*, 25 October 1892; 1 November 1892; 30 December 1892.

⁴⁸ *BTC AR*, 1891, BRO 32080/TC1/4/2.

⁴⁹ Boston, *Women Workers*, pp. 54; 58: Boston argued that a 'spirit of co-operation' existed between the Dockers' Union and the women workers in Bristol during this period, but also suggests that attitudes remained far from inclusive.

spoke positively of 'manliness' and criticised those workers who did not possess such an attribute.⁵⁰ At times, they went even further and suggested that women were not suitable for trade union organisation. As the socialist activist Edward J. Watson argued in 1890, there was 'too much false pride, or what is commonly called "ikeyness," among the women workers', who, he claimed, allowed 'fashion and custom' to hold sway.⁵¹ By now, workers such as Annie Martin had a more audible voice through which to rebut these assertions.⁵² Nonetheless, while the heterogeneous nature of new unionism helped to broaden the basis of the local trade union movement, there was no corresponding transformation in male activists' attitudes towards those who they had historically marginalised or excluded from it.

This was true also for rural and foreign workers. Again, during the 1890s, labour leaders in Bristol displayed an interest in the concerns of these other categories of worker. The Bristol branch of the Gasworkers' Union, for example, organised a section of Gardeners and Agricultural Workers. The BSS and a newly formed branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) formed rambling and cycling groups that visited villages throughout rural Somerset and Gloucestershire.⁵³ Labour activists, especially those who worked at sea, also showed an interest in forming international organisations for the purpose of combating the action of employers and their federations.⁵⁴ Yet, at the same time, they tended to prioritise the claims of the urban and British worker in their literature and public speeches. The annual reports of the trades' council, despite claiming to represent the surrounding districts of Bristol, remained relatively parochial in character and dealt entirely with questions concerning what its secretary described as the 'industrial population'.⁵⁵ Similarly, the professed internationalism of the labour movement did not stop individual trade union branches from seeking the protection of the British worker. In 1890, for instance, members of the local Dockers' Union urged their executive to assist in

⁵⁰ For examples, see BTC AR, 1893-1894, BRO 32080/TC1/4/5; Letter 'Samuel W. Pritchett' to *WDP*, 9 May 1890; Letter 'J. W. Brimble' to *WDP*, 16 July 1892; Tom McCarthy on a demonstration, reported in the *WDP*, 9 January 1893; Letter 'H. Brabham' to *WDP*, 23 November 1893; W. Whitefield to a meeting of miners, reported in the *WDP*, 6 December 1893; Letter 'H. Brabham' to *WDP*, 9 January 1894; Letter 'W. Whitefield' to *BM*, 29 April 1896; Letter 'F. Pile' to *BM*, 14 April 1896; Letter 'Trade Unionist' to *WDP*, 14 April 1899.

⁵¹ Letter 'Edward J. Watson' to *BM*, 18 December 1890. For more on this attitude, see Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, pp. 201-202; Hunt, 'Dancing and Days Out', p. 109.

⁵² Writing to the *Western Daily Press* in 1894, Martin complained of male workers' attitude to their female counterparts. 'Instead of fruitlessly bemoaning the fact that women in the struggle for life are entering into competition with men', she urged male trade unionists to offer 'a helping hand to them and [to draw] them into their own organisations'. Letter 'Annie Martin' to *WDP*, 25 October 1894.

⁵³ *BM*, 27 April 1891; 8 December 1891; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, pp. 71-74.

⁵⁴ *BM*, 3 August 1896.

⁵⁵ BTC AR, 1892-1893, BRO 32080/TC1/4/4; BTC AR, 1893-1894, BRO 32080/TC1/4/5.

securing the 'prohibition of the employment of foreign contract labour'.⁵⁶ In 1895, trades' council delegates asked parliamentary election candidates for their views on the importation of foreign workers, the examination and registration of people in charge of steam builders, and the use of marks of origin on foreign goods.⁵⁷ On occasion, labour activists revealed the nationalistic assumptions that lay behind their class identities. 'The dexterity and co-operation of the working population of this country', wrote E. H. Jarvis of the trades' council, was 'superior to those of the populations of other countries'.⁵⁸

There is also little evidence to suggest that, in Bristol, new unionism had a transformative impact on labour activists' attitudes to the unemployed. As in the 1880s, activists regularly urged local authorities to provide work for the unemployed but also distinguished between those who had temporarily lost their job and those who supposedly had no desire to work. This attitude was not merely the preserve of the older generation of trade union activists. At the height of the strike wave in 1891, John Watts Treasure, a member of the Strike Organising Committee, admitted that he had 'no desire to benefit or relieve those who are too lazy or have no desire to work'. Like 'the Apostle Paul', Treasure believed that 'he that will not work, neither should he live'.⁵⁹ Other younger members of the labour movement shared Treasure's views. During a public meeting on the Poor Law in 1895, Frank Sheppard of the NUBSO distinguished between 'able-bodied men' and those 'who did no work' and 'never would work'.⁶⁰ Moreover, W. R. Oxley of the BSS supported an eight-hour day because it would take 'idlers out of the competition with their fellows'.⁶¹ Although they broadened the basis and extended the scope of their organisations, labour activists, both old and young, still excluded 'idlers', as well as women, rural, and foreign workers, from their conception of the working class.

Treasure, Sheppard, and Oxley represented a younger generation of activists who combined trade unionism with socialist politics. In Bristol, though, the increasing presence of avowed socialists within the ranks of the labour movement

⁵⁶ DWR AR, 1890, MRC MSS.126/DWR/4/1/1.

⁵⁷ *BM*, 13 July 1895.

⁵⁸ Letter 'E. H. Jarvis' to *WDP*, 19 September 1895. For nationalistic and patriotic sentiments among labour and socialist activists elsewhere, see Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 33-36.

⁵⁹ Letter 'James Watts Treasure' to *WDP*, 6 August 1891.

⁶⁰ *BM*, 15 February 1895.

⁶¹ Letter 'W. R. Oxley' to *WDP*, 8 April 1891. See also Letter 'J. W. Brimble' to *WDP*, 16 July 1892; *WDP*, 29 November 1894.

did not convince the majority of trade unionists to embrace socialism.⁶² Throughout the 1890s, most labour activists continued to articulate the ideology of labourism, which, in conceptual terms, differed only slightly from its precursor, working-class radicalism. The term labourism is particularly appropriate for describing this ideology in the 1890s because of the growing prevalence of the term 'labour', and the gradual fading of the term 'radical', in local political discourse. During the 1890s, journalists at the *Bristol Mercury* increasingly began to refer to the trade union movement as 'what is known as the Labour party'. Similarly, for writers at the *Western Daily Press*, 'the Labour Party in Bristol' was composed of a conglomeration of local political and industrial bodies.⁶³ In a statement that neatly summarises this discursive development, and which also draws attention to the continuities between the radical and labour traditions, Charles Townsend, Member of Parliament for Bristol North, told a meeting of Liberal voters in 1895 that they could vote for 'Radical working men, or, if they liked to call them so, Labour candidates'.⁶⁴

To some extent, the rhetorical changes of the 1890s obscure the fact that labourism remained, conceptually, very similar to working-class radicalism. Both during and after the period of new unionism, labour activists placed a strong emphasis on certain concepts, such as democracy and constitutionalism, which had formed the core of radical ideology. Indeed, although the industrial victories of 1889 had demonstrated the potential power of extra-parliamentary strike action, there was no suggestion that this weapon should replace gradual and lawful methods of reform.⁶⁵ Rather, they maintained their belief that the election to public office of labour representatives would, by making political institutions more representative of society, help to eradicate a number of problems faced by industrial workers. For example, far from shaking their faith in using existing political institutions, the experiences of the strike wave convinced trades' council delegates to enshrine the demand for labour representation into their constitution.⁶⁶ Even those who played a leading role in the industrial unrest, such as Dan Irving and Harold Brabham of the Gasworkers' Union, remained convinced that workers should use their *political*

⁶² Previous historians of the Bristol labour movement have argued that trade unionists began to adopt a 'more socialist perspective' during this period. See Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 215; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, pp. 21; 68.

⁶³ *BM*, 26 April 1890; *WDP*, 16 June 1890.

⁶⁴ *WDP*, 12 March 1895.

⁶⁵ Frank Sheppard of the NUBSO and BLEA argued that 'their motto must be democratic principles'. See also *WDP*, 15 November 1893.

⁶⁶ BTC AR, 1891-1892, BRO 32080/TC1/4/3; BTC AR, 1894, BRO 32080/TC1/6/3.

power to advance 'the cause of labour'.⁶⁷ If anything, the success of the employers' counter-offensive after 1893 strengthened the constitutionalist ethos of Bristol labourism even further. In 1899, E. H. Jarvis spoke for many in the local labour movement when he chastised those workers who, despite organising industrially, still sent employers to 'make and administer the laws that guided their industrial life'.⁶⁸

As before 1889, the belief that the workers could utilise existing political institutions for their own ends emanated from a democratic reading of the English constitution. For labour activists, there was nothing inherently wrong with the representative principles that underpinned the constitution. Instead, they criticised what they perceived to be violations of these principles, such as the class imbalances in political representation and the existence of obstacles that prevented elected representatives from using political institutions to their full potential. Thus, the two stated objectives of the BLEA were, firstly, to promote the return of 'bona fide workmen' to local and national governing bodies, and, secondly, to 'obtain by legislative action the removal of all necessary restriction upon the powers and constitutions of such bodies'.⁶⁹

Labour activists also continued to advocate proposals that, they believed, would bring nominally democratic institutions into line with the principles of the constitution. They regularly proposed the abolition or reform of the House of Lords, as well as universal adult suffrage, disestablishment of the church, and shorter parliaments.⁷⁰ For labour activists, then, institutions such as Parliament were essentially neutral bodies that could be recomposed and utilised to improve the lives and conditions of the workers. For John Curle of the BLEA, the City Council had the potential to 'solve many of the evils from which the masses suffer' if only it were composed of representatives from 'all sections of the community'.⁷¹ As Frank Sheppard argued in 1894, just as those in power had used political institutions to confer 'advantages upon themselves', so the workers could 'take hold of some of the machinery for the purpose of conferring benefits upon *their* people'.⁷²

⁶⁷ GWGL AR, 1892, MRC MSS.192/GL/4/1.

⁶⁸ Meeting reported in the *WDP*, 28 March 1899.

⁶⁹ BTC AR, 1891, BRO 32080/TC1/4/2.

⁷⁰ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', pp. 215-216; *BM*, 16 June 1890; 12 January 1894; 13 July 1895; *WDP*, 15 January 1894.

⁷¹ Letter 'John Curle' to *WDP*, 30 October 1893.

⁷² *BM*, 22 January 1894: Emphasis in original.

The themes of rights and liberty also continued to hold a central place in labourist ideology. In particular, labour activists continued to use a language of rights, with its strong emphasis upon the notions of 'justice', 'oppression' and 'tyranny', during periods of strike activity. In 1890, for example, the Strike Organising Committee insisted that the demands of those on strike were 'indisputably just and merely a title of their rights'.⁷³ William Whitefield of the BMA defended trade unionists in similar terms and asserted that they were only advocating 'the right of labour to claim its rights in an organised form'.⁷⁴ Although rarely explained in any great detail, 'the rights of labour', for labour activists, tended to mean the right to form a trade union, the right to a fair wage, and/or the right for fair treatment from employers. Thus, in 1893, Harold Brabham of the Gasworkers' Union considered the reduction of local miners' wages as an 'unjust' action that contravened the principles of 'justice and fair play'.⁷⁵ In 1898, James O'Grady and John Curle of the trades' council suggested that miners on strike were justified in their actions because the colliery owners had established a 'new form of tyranny and oppression'.⁷⁶ Again, though, labour leaders continued to urge workers to use their political as well as industrial power to protect and strengthen their rights.⁷⁷

The conceptual framework of labourist ideology remained intact despite the potentially damaging effects of the new unionist strike wave. Certainly, as in other urban areas, labour activists in Bristol had, by the end of the 1890s, begun to favour a wide range of collectivist policies, such as the selected nationalisation of certain industries, a parliamentary enforced eight-hour day, and free state-based educational provision.⁷⁸ While traditional scholars have seen these programmatic changes as representing an increase in socialist sentiment among trade unionists, this remained an evolution within, not against, labourist ideology.⁷⁹ Firstly, the conceptual core of labourism remained unchanged throughout the 1890s. For the overwhelming majority of labour activists, as we have seen, the experiences of this decade did not discredit the core concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty. Secondly, labour activists did not adopt statist solutions because they

⁷³ First annual report of the Strike Committee republished in *BM*, 18 March 1890.

⁷⁴ Letter 'W. Whitefield, Miners' Agent' to *BM*, 12 December 1895.

⁷⁵ Letter 'H. Brabham, Secretary Gas Workers' and General Labourers' Union' to *WDP*, 26 September 1893.

⁷⁶ 'Appeal from BTC to trade unionists regarding closed collieries (Letter James O'Grady (PofTC) and John Curle (Sec), 13th June 1898', MRC MSS.524/4/1/6.

⁷⁷ BTC AR, 1892, BRO 32080/TC1/4/3. See also BTC AR, 1892-1893, BRO 32080/TC1/4/4.

⁷⁸ The political programme of the trades' council was published in the *BM*, 23 June 1890.

⁷⁹ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 51.

saw them as stepping-stones to a future socialist society. Rather, they considered the adoption of collectivist solutions to be a necessary and logical reaction to political and material change. Far from abandoning the core conceptual framework of their long-held ideology, labour activists simply came to see statist solutions as a more effective way of achieving the objectives of their radical and labour ancestors.⁸⁰

This pragmatic view of state intervention was evident in the way labour activists defended the statist implications of their political programmes. In particular, they justified the inclusion of statist proposals in their programmes, not by evoking socialist themes, but by suggesting that non-statist solutions had historically failed the trade union movement. In two exhaustive letters to the *Western Daily Press* in 1891, William Whitefield of the BMA explained that he supported a state-enacted miners' eight-hour day because trade union action alone would never accomplish this. If trade unions had demonstrated their ability to obtain this objective independently of the state, then, for Whitefield, opponents of state action would have a 'strong case'. However, this was not so. Employers had resolutely refused to accede to the demands of the miners and, as Whitefield opposed strike action, he considered there to be no alternative but to 'turn to Parliament'.⁸¹ W. R. Oxley of the BLEA also adopted a pragmatic approach to the state. Like Whitefield, Oxley did not defend the state limitation of working hours by referring to socialism, but by suggesting that it was 'born out of the necessity of the times' during which there was a 'growing uncertainty of work'.⁸² Furthermore, he favoured state provision for the aged because 'individual voluntary effort' could never fully solve the old age problem.⁸³

Although Oxley was a member of the avowedly socialist BSS at this time, the labourist tone of his statements should come as no surprise. Certain members of the BSS would later recall that there were clear divisions within the organisation between 'practical politicians' and 'idealistic comrades'.⁸⁴ Practical politicians, such as Frank Sheppard, were primarily attracted to the organisation for its pragmatic

⁸⁰ Freedon, *The New Liberalism*, p. 31.

⁸¹ Letter 'W. Whitefield' to *WDP*, 13 March 1891; Letter 'W. Whitefield' to *WDP*, 16 March 1891.

⁸² Letter 'W. R. Oxley' to *WDP*, 8 April 1891.

⁸³ Letter 'W. R. Oxley' to *BM*, 8 February 1899. Another activist advocated the 'socialisation of the means of life' due to the 'continual displacement of human labour by machinery ... under the present system'. *WDP*, 28 March 1899.

⁸⁴ Young, *Robert Weare*, pp. 34; 81.

programme and for its tolerance for ideological diversity.⁸⁵ Indeed, throughout this period, it was more common for Sheppard to articulate the labourist rather than the socialist conception of the state. The collective ownership of the means of production, he argued in 1894, was little more than 'an ideal' that would only be brought about 'in so far as it was practicable'. He did not think that the 'millennium ... preached by the Socialist' was to be attained 'in our generation'. Instead, 'the best thing they could do was to get hold of something tangible and practicable, and bring about some immediate benefits as far as possible'.⁸⁶

The programmatic and organisational fluidity between labourism and socialism was true of all progressives in Bristol at this time, including advanced liberals.⁸⁷ However, while all progressive ideologies underwent a collectivist mutation throughout this period, there remained important distinctions between them. For idealistic socialists in the BSS, the state was the political manifestation of the community, which would eventually take possession of 'land, labour, and capital' in the name of 'human justice'.⁸⁸ For advanced liberals, who advocated policies that one critic described as 'socialistic without satisfying the Socialists', the state was viewed with a certain amount of scepticism and only considered to be useful for remedying evils that could not be redressed without such intervention.⁸⁹ Labourists, though, began to see the state as a positive force that could be utilised to redress certain long-held grievances, such as unemployment and long working hours. This change in attitude did not change the underlying ideological framework of their ideology, but it did serve to provide new meanings to old concepts. For example, labour activists now began to consider the municipal employment of the unemployed, a state-enforced system of state pensions, and the nationalisation of natural monopolies as a way to protect and extend the 'rights of labour'.⁹⁰ In this sense, this was not the evolution of labourism into socialism, but the modification of labourism in response to a changing political and industrial landscape.

⁸⁵ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 61. BSS member John Sharland also favoured a Parliamentary-enforced eight-hour day because it was 'more prompt and effective than trade union agitation'. *BM*, 22 January 1894.

⁸⁶ NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 2*, p. 54.

⁸⁷ Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics*, p. 62; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, pp. 24; 27; E. David, 'The New Liberalism and C. F. G. Masterman, 1873-1927', in K. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), pp. 17-41; Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 67.

⁸⁸ So argued Robert Weare of the BSS in 'Economics and Socialism'. Young, *Robert Weare*, pp. 34; 81.

⁸⁹ *BM*, 19 January 1894; *WDP*, 9 March 1894.

⁹⁰ For examples, see *WDP*, 7 May 1890; 4 August 1891; 6 January 1897; *BM*, 15 February 1895.

4.2 Northampton

The relative lack of unskilled labourers in the local workforce ensured that the strike wave that shook the labour world between 1889 and 1893 largely bypassed Northampton.⁹¹ At this time, however, growing tensions were mounting between employers and workers in the town's staple boot and shoe industry. From the late 1880s onwards, manufacturers' decision to abolish the traditional outdoor working system, to centralise their organisations into workshops, and to introduce labour-saving machinery threatened to curb the relative freedoms that shoemakers traditionally held in their job roles.⁹² In 1895, the Manufacturers' Association brought matters to a head when they submitted a list of seven proposals to the executive of the NUBSO for consideration.⁹³ These proposals, which would have given the employers the fullest control over the management of the factory in terms of machinery, hiring, location, and discipline, were accordingly rejected by the union's executive as 'illegal, unjust, unworkable, unpractical'.⁹⁴ The 'shoe war' began in March 1895 and quickly became the greatest lockout that had occurred in the industry.⁹⁵ Though both sides claimed victory at the cessation of hostilities, the agreed Terms of Settlement allowed manufacturers to limit trade union interference in factories, enforce tighter punctuality and discipline, and curtail informal associations at work.⁹⁶ Shoe manufacturers throughout Britain had at last achieved mastery over their workshops and, with the subsequent surge in mechanisation, the 'disciples of St. Crispin' were well on their way to becoming semi-skilled factory operatives.⁹⁷

⁹¹ The town's trade union activists still played a supportive role in these events. See *NM*, 7 September 1889; NUBSRF MR, December 1889, MRC 547/P/1/7; GWGL AR, 1889, MRC MSS.192/GL/4/1.

⁹² Before 1895, piece-makers were able to enter and leave their workshops at any time during opening hours, and control over discipline, access to the workshop, and the pace of work also remained largely in the hands of the workers. Brooker, 'Northampton Shoemakers' Reaction to Industrialisation', pp. 151-155; Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 95; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 1*, p. 199; E. Brunner, 'The Origins of Industrial Peace: The Case of the British Boot and Shoe Industry', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 1/2 (1949), p. 251.

⁹³ Delegates at the 1890 NUBSRF conference changed the name of their organisation to the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO). This was because the union had begun to organise shoemakers, such as clickers, machinists and fitters, who did not identify with the terms 'rivetter' or 'finisher'. NUBSRF CR, 1890, MRC 547/P/1/16.

⁹⁴ NUBSO MR, March 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11.

⁹⁵ *NM*, 8 March 1895; NUBSO MR, March 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11.

⁹⁶ NUBSO MR, May 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11; Brooker, 'Northampton Shoemakers' Reaction to Industrialisation', pp. 157-158.

⁹⁷ Brooker, 'Northampton Shoemakers' Reaction to Industrialisation', p. 157; Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 109. The defeat severely weakened the union in Northampton and elsewhere. Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, pp. 244-245; NUBSO MR, November 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10; NUBSO MR, November 1901, MRC 547/P/1/17.

For one shoemaker who had entered the shoe trade at the age of seven, this was the 'greatest change [the trade] has experienced since it was an industry'.⁹⁸ While this was true in an industrial sense, the political response of local shoemakers was far from new. Far from hastening a rupture in local labour politics, the shoe war simply reinforced the old conciliatory strategy of the Northampton labour party.⁹⁹ Like their political ancestors, labour activists continued to navigate towards the cross-class organisations led by middle-class radicals and liberals. In the years immediately prior to the lockout, the labour party had successfully achieved municipal representation for the first time by working through the political machinery of the LRU.¹⁰⁰ For Edward Poulton, a member of the NUBSO and a 'Labour-Radical' candidate in 1892, this proved that 'the Radical party, as a whole, had been more willing to listen to the cry of the workers than had the Conservatives'.¹⁰¹ In Northampton at least, Poulton was correct, for the leaders of the LRU displayed a relatively sympathetic attitude to labour representation before the lockout at both parliamentary and municipal levels.¹⁰² Indeed, it was internal wrangling within the labour party, rather than resistance from the LRU's leaders, that prevented Northampton from electing a trade unionist MP before the shoe war erupted. For the town's NUBSO's activists, Charles Bradlaugh's seat, vacated by his death in January 1891, belonged 'by right to the labour party', but, because of his opposition to collective ownership and independent political action, the NUBSO's general secretary refused to stand.¹⁰³ For the time being at least, the LRU failed in its objective to accommodate the local labour party, but not for the want of trying.

As before 1889, the LRU-labour coalition was not a populist movement in which class tensions were absent, but a pragmatic political alliance that rested on fragile foundations. Firstly, the class-based nature of this alliance is evident in the way activists, politicians, and journalists still referred to one of its sections as a 'labour party' despite the lack of an actual labour political organisation in the

⁹⁸ Saxton, *Recollections of William Arnold*, p. 79.

⁹⁹ The political consequences of the lockout were similar in other boot and shoe centres including Leicester and London. See Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 151.

¹⁰⁰ *NM*, 7 November 1890; 28 October 1892: Fred Inwood and Daniel Stanton were elected to the Town Council in 1890 and 1891 respectively.

¹⁰¹ *NM*, 12 August 1892.

¹⁰² As one journalist from the *Northampton Mercury* argued, the 'real force of the Radical party of Northampton' was to be found in its 'recognition of the rights of Labour'. *NM*, 11 January 1895.

¹⁰³ NUBSO MR, February 1890, MRC 547/P/1/7; Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 1*, p. 304; *The NewsPaper*, 14 February 1891; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 101; NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10; *NM*, 12 May 1899.

town.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the strength of a labourist identity was so strong that members of the 'party' viewed new political formations, such as the ILP, with a certain degree of scepticism. In 1892, for instance, W. H. Reynolds of the trades' council demanded to know what this new organisation was, as he knew of 'no other Labour party except the organised trade unions and their councils. He considered that council to be the labour party of Northampton (Hear, hear)'.¹⁰⁵ Secondly, it is possible to detect tensions in the LRU-labour alliance by examining the frequency with which members of the labour party threatened to stand independent labour electoral candidates throughout the 1890s.¹⁰⁶ For activists such as Fred Inwood of the NUBSO, the alliance was an entirely pragmatic arrangement that had proved to be the most effective method of achieving representation for the working class.¹⁰⁷ However, although he became a 'Labour-Radical' councillor in 1890, Inwood still complained that LRU councillors had done little to 'redeem the promises' that they had made to the workers. If they did not keep their promises, then the workers, Inwood warned, would not support the LRU.¹⁰⁸

Inwood and other labour activists rarely followed through with their threats, largely because, throughout the 1890s, LRU leaders demonstrated a willingness to accede to the demands of the labour party and, in particular, their desire for political representation. The LRU's stated commitment to furthering the cause of labour representation also ensured that the majority of labour activists remained loyal to the LRU during and after the shoe war of 1895. LRU leaders again demonstrated their sympathy for the principle at that year's general election, during which they selected Edward Harford of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants as their second candidate.¹⁰⁹ Although Harford was defeated, the majority of labour activists still continued to favour working alongside the LRU.¹¹⁰ Over the next five years, the

¹⁰⁴ For labour activists using the term 'labour party', see *NM*, 12 August 1892; 19 August 1892; 17 October 1890; 28 October 1892; Letter 'A Trade Unionist' to *NM*, 31 October 1890. For middle-class radicals using the term, see *NM*, 12 August 1892; 11 October 1895.

¹⁰⁵ *NM*, 28 October 1892. Discussions took place between labour activists and members of the SDF about forming an 'united Labour party', but these quickly broke down amidst dissension and disagreement. See NUBSO MR, May 1893; July 1893, MRC 547/P/1/9; NUBSO MR, November 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10.

¹⁰⁶ *NM*, 19 October 1889; 22 August 1890; 17 October 1890; 11 September 1891; NTC M, 17 September 1895; 16 September 1896, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹⁰⁷ *NM*, 24 October 1890; 2 October 1891; 19 August 1892. For example, William Hornidge of the NUBSO claimed that he was 'not prepared to wait ten or twelve years to get a solid Labour party before they had labour representation'.

¹⁰⁸ *NM*, 22 August 1890.

¹⁰⁹ Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 73.

¹¹⁰ As the election took place in the immediate aftermath of a bitter lockout, and due to the ongoing 'squabbling as to the title of to Mr. Bradlaugh's political property' among Northampton's radical

labour party contested a number of municipal elections either alongside the LRU or, as in 1895, with their tacit support.¹¹¹ The relative success of this strategy, which yielded a moderate level of labour representation on local governing bodies, convinced labour activists in Northampton to retain the conciliatory political strategy of their working-class radical precursors.

They also retained the working-class radical conception of class and class relations. In their political and industrial appeals, they continued to draw attention to the contrasting interests of different classes whilst also distancing themselves from the politics of class struggle. During their municipal election campaigns, candidates sought to convince voters of their class background by demonstrating their knowledge of working-class life and by describing the hardships that they had encountered as working men. For example, the literature produced for one 'Radical and Labour' candidate suggested that he knew 'from personal acquaintance ... the pressing needs of the workers, having worked with and amongst them'.¹¹² Fred Inwood, who stood in 1890 'not only as a Radical but as a labour man', assured voters that he 'knew the condition of the workers, their difficulty to pay the rates, and their struggle to make both ends meet'.¹¹³ Labour activists' preoccupation with working-class authenticity even prevented a trades' council delegate from standing as a municipal candidate in 1891. After trades' council leaders proposed the candidature of a local painter and decorator, a number of delegates expressed their dissatisfaction with the choice because, the *Northampton Mercury* reported, he was 'not...according to the views of some of the Trades' Council, a "working-man" in the strictest sense of the term'. Due to the trades' council's strict definition of who was and who was not a genuine working man, the candidate, who employed members of his own family, was forced to resign his candidature.¹¹⁴

The conception of class that informed the political and ideological perspectives of labour activists in Northampton, therefore, remained strongly exclusivist in tone. At the same time, activists continued to express their opposition to those theories that advocated a class war. They certainly did not deny class

community, Harford was unsuccessful and a Conservative obtained the second parliamentary seat. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 July 1895; P. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: A History of the National Union of Railwaymen* (London, 1963), p. 200; *NM*, 12 April 1895; 19 July 1895.

¹¹¹ NTC M, 17 September 1895; 16 September 1896; 16 February 1898, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NUBSO MR, November 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11; *NM*, 18 November 1898.

¹¹² 'To the Electors of the East Ward', NCL 198-781/9/1896.

¹¹³ *NM*, 17 October 1890.

¹¹⁴ *NM*, 25 September 1891; 9 October 1891.

distinctions. At times, for instance, they opposed schemes that they deemed 'entirely for the benefit of the Middle Class'.¹¹⁵ Neither, as we have seen, did they consider themselves to be part of a trans-class movement of 'the people'. Rather, they maintained the belief that their demands would bring about a fairer and a more equitable political and industrial balance between different sections of the community. Thus, during the 1890 municipal elections, the LRU-labour candidate Daniel Stanton drew clear distinctions between 'capital and labour' and between the 'middle and working classes', but encouraged these classes to 'work together for the common good'. In fact, Stanton regretted the frictions between capital and labour and believed that each deserved 'equal justice'. Fred Inwood expressed almost identical views during his own municipal election campaign in the same year. At one public meeting, he stated his hope that 'all class distinctions would gradually [be] swept away'. Again, though, Inwood still considered the 'distributors', or the middle class, to have fundamentally different traits and experiences from those of the 'producers', or the working class.¹¹⁶ It was this non-adversarial conception of class relations that helped to ensure that the local labour party, despite failing to manifest itself in an organisational form, remained a discernible component in the cross-class LRU-labour alliance of the 1890s.

As in Bristol, labour activists in Northampton used more antagonistic language towards employers during periods of industrial unrest.¹¹⁷ Yet, even during the shoe war of 1895, it was far more common for activists to express their belief that class conflict was an undesirable means of achieving their goals. During trade union meetings and conferences throughout the strike, as well as in their written accounts, NUBSO members criticised manufacturers not for being manufacturers *per se*, but for failing to adhere to a conciliatory view of labour-capital relations. Local trade unionists opposed the 'tyrannical' behaviour of the Manufacturers' Association and urged employers to treat their workers in a fair and just manner by respecting the independence and the industrial 'rights' of the shoemaker.¹¹⁸ Like other members in his NUBSO branch, Edward Poulton acknowledged the right of employers to make demands, but argued that they should submit them through the

¹¹⁵ NTC AR, July 1892, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13.

¹¹⁶ *NM*, 17 October 1890; 24 October 1890.

¹¹⁷ For example, the usually moderate Inwood spoke of 'poor employees', 'rich capitalists', and the 'battle between capital and labour' during the London dock strike. See *NM*, 7 September 1889.

¹¹⁸ NUBSO MR, May 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11.

framework of arbitration boards.¹¹⁹ In fact, this method of resolving disputes was, for Poulton, the practical realisation of the conciliatory view of class relations. In Poulton's view, the interests of workers and employers were 'not identical', but they could both achieve their respective and legitimate goals by improving, rather than bypassing, the arbitration process.¹²⁰

The prevalence of this view of class relations was not a new development among labour activists in Northampton. Continuities with older political traditions were also evident in the way labour activists used the terms 'the people' and 'the workers' without distinction. In one particularly pertinent example from 1897, a meeting of the trades' council passed two resolutions: one opposing an increase in army and navy estimates because it was 'against the best interests of *the workers*', and one opposing subsidised sectarian education because it was 'against the best interests of *the people*'.¹²¹ Daniel Stanton of the NUBSO also used these terms interchangeably during this period. During a discussion at the 1894 NUBSO conference, Stanton spoke of 'the natural rights of the people' and the need for 'the people' to establish nationalised industries. Stanton, though, did not consider 'the people' to be a trans-class group of employers and workers. Rather, for Stanton, 'the people' were those who faced an 'uncertainty of employment' and those who sought improved conditions at work, namely, 'labour' or 'the workers'.¹²²

'The people' and 'the masses' featured prominently in Edward Poulton's monthly reports to NUBSO head office.¹²³ Once again, by drawing a clear distinction between the workers and the employers in his reports, Poulton provided 'the people' with a restricted meaning. In a report from 1893, for example, he urged 'the workers' to use their political power because for 'too long have *we* allowed *the employing class* to use this powerful factor, and they naturally have used it to their own advantage'.¹²⁴ Poulton expressed similar sentiments in the annual reports of the local trades' council, which he co-wrote alongside W. H. Reynolds during this period. In the 1896 report, the co-authors expressed their desire for a society in which 'the whole of the people of this country will be properly provided for', but also complained that the Conservative government had been unsatisfactory 'so far as the worker's lot is concerned'. They stated their wish to see a factory inspector in the

¹¹⁹ *NM*, 29 March 1895.

¹²⁰ NUBSO MR, March 1895; May 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11.

¹²¹ NTC M, 24 February 1897, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹²² NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10. See also NUBSO MR, April 1893, MRC 547/P/1/9.

¹²³ NUBSO MR, February 1891, MRC 547/P/1/8.

¹²⁴ NUBSO MR, August 1893, MRC 547/P/1/9: Emphasis added.

town as it would be advantageous 'from the workers' standpoint', whilst also demanding some control of the political power of the country so that the wishes or 'the workers' would not be ignored. For activists such as Poulton, 'the people' were, essentially, 'the workers'.¹²⁵

In Northampton, this understanding of 'the people' did not emerge in the 1890s, or in the 1880s, but in the decades prior to this. To some extent, this is also true of the way labour activists defined the working class. For example, most of them continued to convey male-centric sentiments despite the large numbers of women employed in the local boot and shoe trade. While, as in Bristol, there was a greater desire among NUBSO leaders in Northampton to organise women's labour throughout this period, the political language of male trade unionists continued to reveal the gendered assumptions that underlay their perception of the workers.¹²⁶ It is not hard to find instances of trade unionists using terms such as 'workmen' or 'the men' in their speeches.¹²⁷ Furthermore, male trade unionists continued to use 'unmanliness' as a pejorative term. They frequently appealed to workers' sense of 'manhood', accused non-unionists of being 'unmanly', and blamed outworkers for the 'unmanly' way they sweated their wives and children.¹²⁸ At times, they also marginalised women workers by advocating policies that would remove women from the workplace. In 1898, for instance, trades' council delegates approved of the suggestion that 'in the event of any female teacher...getting married, she [should] be required to send in her resignation at once'.¹²⁹

Labour activists also refused to abandon their old ideas about workers in rural areas. Though they often communicated their sympathy with rural-based workers and their conditions, labour activists essentially viewed them as a threat to the privileged position of the urban worker. Throughout the 1890s, for example, shoemakers in Northampton frequently expressed their disappointment with outworkers who worked from their homes in rural districts.¹³⁰ As Daniel Stanton

¹²⁵ For other examples, see NTC AR, 1896, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; NTC AR, 1897, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; NTC AR, 1899, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13.

¹²⁶ NUBSO MR, February 1892, MRC 547/P/1/8; NUBSO CR, 1898, MRC 547/P/1/14; NTC M, 21 July 1897, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹²⁷ For examples, see NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10; NUBSO CR, 1898, MRC 547/P/1/14; NTC AR, 1893, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13.

¹²⁸ NM, 7 September 1889; Letter 'A Clicker and Member of the Union' to NM, 29 March 1890; Brunner, 'The Origins of Industrial Peace', p. 156; NTC AR, 1892, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13.

¹²⁹ NTC AR, 1898, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13.

¹³⁰ Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 100; H. Rydberg, 'The Location of the English Shoe Industry', *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 47/1 (1965), p. 46; Church, 'The Effect of the American Export Invasion', p. 231.

complained in 1894, they in Northampton were surrounded by villages where factories were erected 'every time employers were pushed into a corner'. Unfortunately, as Stanton explained, shoemakers in these villages often refused to join the union. 'In some places', he claimed, 'they had a difficulty in getting men to listen to Trades' Unionists, let alone join them'.¹³¹ Edward Poulton shared Stanton's sense of frustration with outworkers. Poulton lamented that trade unionism was an 'unknown quantity' in these districts despite the NUBSO's attempts to 'show these men the injustice they are inflicting, not only upon those who live in the town, but to themselves, their wives, and their families'.¹³² Labour activists' disappointment with workers in rural areas was further exacerbated by the tendency of agricultural labourers to provide a cheap source of labour for manufacturers. Sympathising with the labourer for being 'ground down' by the farmer did not stop labour activists from criticising them for causing an 'unhealthy competition' for labour in the towns.¹³³

Attitudes towards foreign workers are more difficult to discern, mainly because foreign immigration was a minor issue in Northampton at this time. Local trade unionists did discuss the experiences of workers who were more directly affected, such as shoemakers in London, but this was out of sense of solidarity rather than one of shared experience. At a public meeting in 1889, Edwin Johnson of the Cordwainers' Union even argued that tailors did not deserve the support of trade unionists because 'many of them were foreigners ... who had come over here and reduced wages themselves'.¹³⁴ The trades' council also passed a resolution against 'pauper immigration' in 1892, but this was only a major problem in the shoemaking centres of London, Manchester, and Leeds.¹³⁵ Far more frequent were expressions of pride in the unique traits of the British working man.¹³⁶ In 1890, for example, Fred Inwood implored unorganised shoemakers to join the NUBSO so as to 'maintain their position as honest British workmen'. Similarly, on the eve of shoe war in 1895, shoemakers reportedly sang of 'the honest British working men' who would 'by each other stand; till victory shall crown the cause of Labour through the land'.¹³⁷

¹³¹ NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10.

¹³² NUBSO MR, October 1899, MRC 547/P/1/15; NUBSO MR, January 1900, MRC 547/P/1/16.

¹³³ *NM*, 17 February 1893.

¹³⁴ *NM*, 14 September 1889.

¹³⁵ NTC AR, 1893, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 18.

¹³⁶ H. Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism, 1750-1914', *History Workshop*, 12 (1981), p. 25; McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 89.

¹³⁷ *NM*, 22 March 1890; NUBSO MR, February 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11.

Labour activists evoked the honesty and integrity of British workers when discussing the question of unemployment. After 1889, trade union leaders in Northampton began to take a more active role in advocating the claims of the unemployed, principally by asking the Town Council to provide relief and temporary employment.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, they also remained keen to distinguish between different sections of the unemployed. George Green of the local Gasworkers' Union explained that the 'working men's' relief committee, set up in 1891, would only help the '*bona fide* working man', not the 'loafer'. Even Daniel Stanton, who, as a member of the Board of Guardians, worked tirelessly to find municipal work for the unemployed, set the genuine worker apart from the 'loafer'. In 1893, he criticised the Town Council's decision to provide the unemployed with an opportunity for stone breaking as he deemed this work unbecoming of anyone who was not a mere 'vagrant'. Activists such as Stanton thus continued to draw a clear distinction between workers who had temporarily lost their job through no fault of their own, and those who, they believed, would refuse work even if they were offered it. It was perhaps unsurprising, then, that of the delegates chosen to represent the unemployed on a deputation to the Town Council in 1891, not one failed to emphasise his diligence, the short-term nature of his unemployment, or his desire for 'any kind of work'.¹³⁹

The class identity of labour activists in Northampton thus remained restrictive in tone and male-centric, urban, and British in focus. In their efforts to secure the working-class vote, all political parties in Northampton appealed to this highly qualified sense of class during the 1890s. For example, Conservative election material frequently employed terms and idioms, such as 'Labour Politics', 'The Working Men of Northampton', and 'a fair day's wage for a fair day's work', in a thoroughly positive sense, whilst also speaking negatively of 'starvation wages', 'sweaters who grind the poor', and 'Radical capitalists'.¹⁴⁰ An even more restrictive sense of class pervaded the electoral literature of Liberal and middle-class Radical candidates. During the 1891 by-election, the Liberals made overtures not to the workers in a general sense, but, more specifically, to the Bradlaugh-voting, British, radical shoemaker:

¹³⁸ NTC AR, 1892, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; NTC AR, 1893, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; NTC AR, 1895, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13.

¹³⁹ *NM*, 9 January 1891; 16 January 1891; 17 November 1893.

¹⁴⁰ 'To the Working Men of Northampton', NCL 198-781/9/1891; 'To the Electors of the Borough of Northampton', NCL 198-781/9/1891. Conservative appeals were similar. See 'Vote for Drucker and Jacobs, the Friends of the Working Classes', NCL 198-781/9/1895.

'Crispins arouse! On you an Empire's eyes
Will look next Thursday, and, if you are wise,
Thousands of waiting hearts will gladdened be,
When fight is o'er, at Manfield's victory.
No faltering then, but swift and early vote;
"Remember Bradlaugh," this is the grand key-note'.¹⁴¹

This appeal to the democratic instincts of Northampton's shoemakers would have resonated with activists in the local labour party. Throughout the 1890s, labour activists continued to demonstrate a strong commitment to the democratic and constitutional ethos that had formed a core component of working-class radical ideology. For example, there was little disagreement amongst activists when, during discussions to form an ILP in 1893, they discussed a range of democratic proposals, such as three-year maximum parliaments and the abolition of hereditary representation in government.¹⁴² Though radicals of all classes advocated similar proposals during this period, labour activists continued to add a class dimension to their conception of democracy.¹⁴³ Above all, they did so by associating the concept with the principle of labour representation. In contrast to middle-class radicals, who justified their support for this principle by focusing on its impact upon the whole community, labour activists tended to stress the potential economic benefits it would yield for the workers exclusively. Daniel Stanton, for instance, favoured sending a bulk of trade union representatives to Parliament so that they could modify the law relating to trade disputes 'in favour of the workmen'.¹⁴⁴ Far from evoking universalist themes when discussing this principle, Stanton complained that the 'capitalists' had full possession of the House of Commons and, subsequently, the 'reins of government in their hands'. Moreover, he argued that the workers needed labour representatives because they had 'bare funds to fall on in case of extremity' while the employers had the backing of the police and the military authorities. To

¹⁴¹ *The NewsPaper*, 14 February 1891.

¹⁴² *NM*, 23 June 1893.

¹⁴³ The LRU's programme, formulated in 1893, called for the abolition of the Lords, shorter parliaments, and labour representation. *NM*, 17 March 1893.

¹⁴⁴ The Northampton branch of the NUBSO initiated the discussion within the union about running a union-backed parliamentary candidate. NUBSO MR, February 1891, MRC 547/P/1/8.

remedy this class imbalance in representation, Stanton advised the 'working classes' to send a considerable number of 'their own order' to represent them.¹⁴⁵

The demand for parliamentary and municipal labour representation was consistent with labour activists' ongoing commitment to what Edward Poulton described as 'reasonable and 'peaceful' methods of reform.¹⁴⁶ The political and industrial defeats of 1895, far from challenging activists' faith in constitutional methods, encouraged them to pursue their existing strategy with more rigour. As Poulton explained in the aftermath of the lockout, workers could avenge the defeats by teaching 'the employing class' a lesson at the ballot box, which would serve to 'awaken them to the fact that democracy, once alive to its own interest, will make the conditions of the workers satisfactory from all points of view'.¹⁴⁷ There is little in this conception of democracy and constitutionalism concerning the welfare of the community at large. Instead, labour activists continued to justify their pursuit of labour representation and democratic reform by alluding to the unequal class distribution of political and economic power. Like their working-class radical predecessors, labour activists believed that these imbalances violated the representative principles that lay at the heart of the constitution. As the constitution granted men (not, principally, women) certain political rights, such as the right of their class to a fair share of political representation, labour activists demanded a proportionate share in the government of both the town/city and the nation. As the workers 'helped to bear [the] burdens' of municipal life, so it was 'only right', Stanton argued, 'that they should participate in its government'.¹⁴⁸

This emphasis on political rights further demonstrates the legacy of working-class radicalism. As before 1889, labour activists also employed a language of rights when discussing industrial questions. In particular, they often argued that by making certain demands, such as the right of workers to join a trade union, they were merely seeking to defend the rights and liberties of labour. As Fred Inwood stated in 1891, 'all that the Union's men wanted was that which was fair and right, both as regarded wages and liberties'.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, for Inwood, justice was the ultimate object of trade

¹⁴⁵ Letter 'D. Stanton' to NUBSO MR, March 1891, MRC 547/P/1/8; NUBSO CR, 1892, MRC 547/P/1/8. Other Northampton-based labour activists made similar arguments. See *NM*, 12 August 1892; 19 August 1892; NUBSO MR, May 1893; August 1893, MRC 547/P/1/9.

¹⁴⁶ NUBSO MR, March 1893, MRC 547/P/1/9; NTC AR, June 1893, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13.

¹⁴⁷ NUBSO MR, May 1895, MRC 547/P/1/11.

¹⁴⁸ *NM*, 16 October 1891. For another example, see *NM*, 17 October 1890.

¹⁴⁹ NUBSO MR, June 1891, MRC 547/P/1/8.

unionism.¹⁵⁰ At the same time, labour activists also continued to evoke the themes of rights, justice, and fairness when discussing political questions. For instance, in 1893, Edward Poulton supported labour representation as a means through which labour could receive 'her just reward'.¹⁵¹ Fred Inwood supported the same principle because the workers were not fairly represented and had not been 'dealt with ... so justly as they might have been'.¹⁵² Daniel Stanton believed nationalisation of the land was both 'lawful and just' as it would restore one of the 'natural rights of the people'.¹⁵³ For labour activists, the old radical language of rights remained entirely appropriate to changing political and ideological environment of the 1890s.

Labour activists in Northampton, while exhibiting a sense of loyalty to the core concepts of working-class radicalism, were not immune to wider ideological developments taking place in the 1890s. Indeed, by the end of the decade, there was general agreement within local progressive circles that the state should have a more positive role to play in the social and economic life of the nation.¹⁵⁴ The strongest advocates of state intervention were to be found in the local branch of the SDF, whose members favoured, amongst other things, the collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.¹⁵⁵ While this demand was too advanced for some members of the labour party, statist sentiments were not the sole preserve of socialist activists.¹⁵⁶ Non-socialist members of the trades' council, for instance, became strong advocates of municipalisation, a system of old age pensions, and selective nationalisation during this period.¹⁵⁷ Edward Poulton, who remained loyal to the LRU and expressed hostility to the SDF, even declared himself to be in favour of collective ownership and a parliamentary-enforced eight-hour day.¹⁵⁸ By the end of the 1890s, ideological differences among local progressives had become

¹⁵⁰ *NM*, 22 March 1890. For other examples, see *NM*, 6 June 1890; 18 July 1890; 1 May 1891; 22 December 1893. 'The Coming Election' written by 'Karl of Kingsthorpe', published in *NM*, 3 June 1892.

¹⁵¹ NUBSO MR, July 1893, MRC 547/P/1/9.

¹⁵² *NM*, 24 October 1890.

¹⁵³ NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10.

¹⁵⁴ This was certainly not restricted to Northampton. See Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics*, pp. 69-70; Moore, 'Progressive Pioneers', p. 991.

¹⁵⁵ The perceived inactivity of the union leadership in the face of industrial changes led to a rise in support for socialist activists within NUBSO branches. See Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 1*, pp. 199-200; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 108; Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 106.

¹⁵⁶ *NM*, 23 June 1893.

¹⁵⁷ NTC AR, 1894, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; NTC AR, 1895, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; NTC AR, 1899, MRC MSS.524/4/1/13; NTC M, 24 February 1897; 21 December 1898, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹⁵⁸ *NM*, 13 April 1894; NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10.

so slight, especially after the LRU's adoption of the 'Progressive Programme' in 1897, that the socialist SDF accused the LRU of stealing its programme.¹⁵⁹

The increasingly collectivist tone of labourist ideology did not transform its conceptual framework, but merely demonstrated its flexibility in the face of new developments and experiences. Rather than converting to socialism, labour activists such as Poulton and Stanton continued to give expression to an ideology that, whilst sharing a number of common characteristics with other ideologies, remained distinctive in its own right.¹⁶⁰ At times, they used terms such as 'radical' or 'socialist' to describe their perspectives. Poulton, for example, argued that his view, and not the 'wrong interpretation' offered by SDF activists, represented the proper meaning of socialism.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, there remained clear distinctions between the ideology articulated by activists such as Poulton and the socialism as espoused by members of the SDF. In particular, these differences are evident in the way activists justified their support for certain proposals. Whereas socialists saw collective ownership as a necessary step towards a post-capitalist society, labour activists tended to advocate it for entirely practical reasons. For instance, Daniel Stanton, who briefly joined the SDF in 1893, accepted that it was 'as much the duty of the Government to take over the means of production as it was to take over the Post Office, telephones and railways', but he pulled back from advocating nationalisation of the boot and shoe industry. Nationalisation, he argued, did not mean 'confiscation', as the workers would achieve this principle 'honestly, fairly and squarely' through 'national co-operation'. Furthermore, in contrast to many within the SDF, Stanton downplayed the revolutionary connotations of this principle, offering instead a thoroughly pragmatic justification for its adoption. 'Uncertainty of employment was a curse they sought a remedy for', he claimed, 'and they believed security could be better given by Government than under the present system of competition and throat-cutting all round'.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ 'Northampton's Call To Arms, The Progressive Programme', NCL 198-781/9/1897; 'Important Information for Northampton Ratepayers: The Progressive Policy', NCL 198-781/9/1898; *NS*, 17 July 1897; 16 October 1897. Northampton Liberals seemed to embrace the 'progressivism' pioneered by Liberals in, for example, Manchester. See Moore, 'Progressive Pioneers', pp. 989-1013.

¹⁶⁰ The adoption of collectivist proposals by local trade union branches does not necessarily represent an underlying ideological change. NUBSO meetings were poorly attended at this time, and SDF members could, as one activist candidly admitted in 1897, 'carry almost any resolution they desired' if they turned up in significant numbers. *NM*, 6 August 1897.

¹⁶¹ NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10. William Hornidge of the NUBSO also claimed to be a socialist but insisted that he was a 'Trade Unionist first'. NUBSO MR, April 1893, MRC 547/P/1/9.

¹⁶² NUBSO CR, 1894, MRC 547/P/1/10; *NM*, 30 June 1893.

During his very brief tenure in the SDF, Stanton declared that there should be 'no difference between Trade Unionism and Socialism'.¹⁶³ As well as being an insightful description of labourism in its collectivist form, this statement explains why individuals like Stanton could move so effortlessly between different progressive organisations. At times, labour activists saw the LRU as the most effective vehicle through which to achieve their goals, especially when that organisation demonstrated its commitment to furthering labour representation. On other occasions, labour activists grew disappointed and frustrated with the inaction of LRU representatives and became more favourable towards the SDF as well as the idea of independent political representation. Thus, in the absence of an organisational expression of labourism in Northampton, labour activists had to choose between two organisations that only partially accommodated their interests. Yet, their attitude towards these organisations was primarily political, strategic, and pragmatic rather than ideological in nature. Regardless of their political affiliation, the majority of labour activists continued to articulate the distinctive ideology of labourism, which, in its underlying conceptual framework, remained almost identical to the ideology of working-class radicalism.

4.3 Summary

In September 1899, delegates at the Trades Union Congress agreed to organise a conference that would bring together co-operative, socialist, trade union and other working-class organisations to discuss increasing the number of labour representatives in Parliament. James Ramsay Macdonald interpreted this decision, which ultimately led to the birth of the Labour Representation Committee, as a direct outcome of the industrial struggles of the 1890s.¹⁶⁴ There was no such linear progression for the labour parties in Bristol and Northampton. In these constituencies, the final decade of the nineteenth century was characterised by an unprecedented level of industrial conflict, a rapid rise and rapid decline of trade union power, a growth in the presence and confidence of socialist activists, and, in Northampton at least, important changes at the workplace. While these developments were significant in and of themselves, they did not lead to a substantial transformation in the character of local labour politics. Indeed, in three

¹⁶³ *NM*, 3 November 1893.

¹⁶⁴ J. R. Macdonald, 'Report of the First Annual Conference of the Labour Representation Committee', in *The Labour Party Foundation Conference and Annual Conference Reports 1900-1905* (London, 1967), p. 8.

crucial regards, labour politics in these two constituencies was marked by continuity rather than change. Firstly, continuities with older working-class radical and labour traditions were evident in activists' political strategies. Just as in the previous two decades, the labour party in Bristol continued to declare its organisational independence from the Liberals, whereas in Northampton there remained a stronger desire for a pragmatic and cross-class political alliance with the LRU. Despite some notable political conversions and defections during this period, the strike wave in Bristol and the lock out in Northampton did little to alter the overall trajectory of labour politics.

Secondly, there were continuities in the way labour activists understood and articulated their understanding of class and the social order. In particular, they continued to base their conception of working class upon a series of restrictive assumptions regarding work, nationality, gender, and place. As previous chapters have demonstrated, there was nothing particularly novel about this class identity. What is surprising, though, is the resilience of this conception of class in the face of developments that challenged the underlying assumptions upon which it was based. For example, although male trade unionists displayed an increasing desire to organise female labour throughout this period, they continued to use a highly gendered language that served to marginalise women workers. Activists' non-conflictual view of class relations also survived the turbulent years of the 1890s. During periods of severe industrial unrest, their language could become more hostile towards the employing class. Antagonistic attitudes, however, were far from prevalent within labour discourse. Rather, the majority of labour activists continued to perceive classes as distinct sections of the community that had their own interests and contrasting political priorities. At the same time, they remained unconvinced by the class war theories of militant socialists, and instead emphasised the themes of class peace and negotiation. Thus, while they acknowledged class distinctions, in both a political and economic sense, they did not advocate class warfare as the solution. They sought a rebalancing of the existing order, not its overthrow.

Finally, there were significant ideological continuities within 1890s labour politics. During the final decade of the nineteenth century, labour politics in Bristol, Northampton, and elsewhere became increasingly collectivist in tone.¹⁶⁵ This

¹⁶⁵ A. Marwick, 'The Labour Party and the Welfare State in Britain, 1900-1948', *The American Historical Review*, 73/2 (1967), p. 382. P. Thane, 'Labour and welfare' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 82-83.

development, in Bristol and Northampton at least, did not represent the conversion of the labour movement to socialism, but an evolution within labourism. In conceptual terms, this period witnessed a gradual shift within labourism during which the concept of the state came to hold a more prominent position within its ideological morphology.¹⁶⁶ The elevation of this concept provided labourism's core concepts with a new accent, but it did not fundamentally transform it as an ideology. As we have seen, the class-inflected concepts that had defined working-class radicalism, namely, democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty, remained at the heart of labourist ideology. As a consequence, during periods of severe industrial conflict, labour activists remained committed to achieving political and economic reform for the working class through democratic and constitutional channels. They continued to evoke the rights of labour and the liberties of trade unionists and favoured the gradual rebalancing of the social order in favour of their class. By the turn of the century, labour activists had simply begun to see state action, not as an end in itself, but as an effective means through which to bring about these social reforms. By remaining committed to their old political strategies, their deep-rooted conceptions of class and social order, and their long-held ideological perspectives, labour activists demonstrated the resilience of working-class radical traditions in the face of significant industrial conflict and economic change.

¹⁶⁶ Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 68.

5: Going in 'Strong for Labour', 1900-1914¹

A number of political developments between 1900 and 1914, not least the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, helped to lay the organisational foundations of the progressive political realignment in interwar Britain.² The birth of a national political party based on the trade union movement was certainly without precedent in British history. Indeed, some historians have seen the growth of the Labour party as reflecting a more general rise of 'class politics' in Britain.³ The formation of trade union-based labour parties in Bristol and Northampton, however, did not represent the rise of class politics in these constituencies. As we have seen, in these constituencies, class had shaped the identities, the vocabulary, and the ideologies of working-class radical activists since the late 1860s. Nor did their emergence signify a major break with past political strategies. The Bristol Labour Representation Committee (BLRC), formed in 1907, fully embraced the independent spirit of local radical and labour traditions by continuing to challenge the 'conservative' local Liberal party at a municipal and parliamentary level.⁴ Similarly, most activists in the Northampton Labour Representation Council (NLRC), formed on the eve of the First World War, initially refused to abandon their old conciliatory attitude towards the fairly accommodating local Liberal party. In terms of political strategy, the formation of local LRCs in Bristol and Northampton represented a recomposition, not a rejection, of older political traditions.

¹ In 1910, Daniel Stanton told a meeting of the Northampton Trades' Council to 'drop [their] political parties and 'isms' and go in strong for Labour'. NTC M, 21 September 1910, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

² For details of these development at a local level, see, for example, Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 104; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 24; Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour', p. 168. The formation of local cells of the Labour party did not necessarily prevent Liberal/Labour electoral pacts. For examples, see Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 162; Cherry, *Doing Different?*, pp. 70-71; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 137.

³ For examples of the 'rise of class politics' thesis, see Cole, *British Working Class Politics*; McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*; Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, pp. 194-213; Kirk, *Change, continuity and class*; S. Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-1920* (London, 2014). Peter Clarke, while accepting the 'rise of class politics' thesis, believed that the Liberals adjusted themselves to it. See P. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971). For criticisms of this thesis, see Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, p. 160; D. Tanner, 'Elections, Statistics, and the Rise of the Labour Party, 1906-1931', *The Historical Journal*, 34/3 (1991), pp. 893-908; Tanner, 'Class voting and radical politics: the Liberal and Labour parties, 1910-31', pp. 106-130; R. Douglas, 'Labour in Decline, 1910-14', in K. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), pp. 119-125.

⁴ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 291; NUBSO MR, December 1906, MRC 547/P/1/22; BILP M, 27 October 1907, LSEILP FILM 86. For similar case studies see G. L. Bernstein, 'Liberalism and the Progressive Alliance in the Constituencies, 1900-1914: Three Case Studies', *The Historical Journal*, 26/3 (1983), p. 618.

As well as complicating the 'rise of class' thesis, the case studies of Bristol and Northampton suggest that scholars in the liberal revisionist tradition may have presented an overly optimistic image of Edwardian popular politics by downplaying the significance of class within it. This was especially true for labour politics in Bristol and Northampton. In their speeches and political literature, labour activists in these constituencies continued to emphasise the unique concerns and interests of the working-class section of the community, or, at least, its male, British, and urban subsection.⁵ During their election campaigns, they directed their appeals almost exclusively to working-class voters and promised that, if elected, they would principally serve the class to which they belonged.⁶ While non-class terms such as 'the people' continued to pervade their political language, labour activists and politicians continued to imbue the term with class-inflected meanings.⁷ Furthermore, they also continued to eschew the politics of class conflict in favour of a conciliatory view of class relations, even during the period of large-scale industrial unrest after 1910.⁸ The prevalence of this view of class relations among labour activists, and the frequency with which they articulated it through their political appeals, suggests that old ways of thinking remained relevant in the Edwardian period.⁹

This is also true in an ideological sense. After 1900, labour activists at a national and local level began to include a far wider range of statist demands in their political programmes than ever before.¹⁰ Nevertheless, while this was an important development in a programmatic sense, it did not reflect a transformation in the core principles of labourist ideology. In short, the concepts that had defined working-class radical and labourist ideology since the late 1860s remained at the core of Edwardian

⁵ Female membership of trade unions rose from 166,803 in 1906 to 357,956 in 1914. Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 71. For the male-centric appeals of labour activists in other constituencies, see Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism*, p. 179. For a discussion of Labour party patriotism, see Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 97-101; For a discussion of race and the political left during this period, see Barrow, 'White solidarity in 1914', pp. 275-287. For a discussion of the Labour party's attitude to the land question, see Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the Land', pp. 127-144. For a discussion of the Labour party's attitude to the unemployed and pauperism, see Thane, 'Labour and welfare', pp. 80-88.

⁶ Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, p. 111.

⁷ Patrick Joyce sees the prevalence of 'the people' within political discourse as evidence of the essentially trans-class nature of Edwardian politics. See Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 5; 335; Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, pp. 4-5.

⁸ During these years, Britain experienced strikes 'on a scale not previously experienced'. In 1909, there were 422 stoppages; 1910, 521; 1911, 872; 1912, 834; 1913, 1,459; 1914, 972. See H. Clegg, A. Fox and A. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 2, 1911-1933* (Oxford, 1985), p. 24; Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society*, p. 147.

⁹ For arguments in favour of 'popular' radical-labour continuity, see Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 18; Reid, 'Old Unionism reconsidered', p. 243; Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 240.

¹⁰ Jackson, *Equality and the British Left*, p. 46; Cherry, *Doing Different?*, pp. 63-64. This is not to say that they favoured all examples of state intervention. See Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society*, p. 2.

labourism.¹¹ Thus, in Bristol and Northampton, labour activists continued to promote increased labour representation as a way to enhance democracy and as a solution to the problem of inequality in political representation. They justified their advocacy of certain demands, including the reversals of the Taff Vale decision and the Osborne Judgement, by evoking constitutionalist themes and, more specifically, by claiming that these reforms would strengthen the rights and liberties of the workers.¹² While they began to advocate a more extensive range of statist solutions, they only did so because they saw state intervention as a more effective means of furthering long-held goals.¹³ Through their ideological perspectives, as well as through their political strategies and their conceptions of class, labour activists in Bristol and Northampton thus continued to demonstrate a strong sense of loyalty to the old working-class radical traditions.

Seeing the Bristol and Northampton LRCs as successor movements to the working-class radical and labour movements of the nineteenth century makes it easier to understand the dynamics of progressive politics in these constituencies during the Edwardian era. In particular, it becomes it far easier to explain the nature of the relationship between the local Liberal parties and their Labour counterparts. In Bristol and Northampton, progressive politics after 1900 was divided between an electorally dominant Liberal party and a less successful but stubbornly determined labour movement. Activists on both sides of the progressive divide agreed on a broad range of issues, especially during the 1910 general elections and the battle of 'the people' against 'the peers'.¹⁴ At the same time, there were numerous questions, both strategic and ideological, on which they disagreed.¹⁵ There were also marked social differences between the Liberal and Labour parties, which subsequently

¹¹ Jackson, *Equality and the British Left*, p. 24.

¹² In the aftermath of a railway strike in South Wales, the House of Lords decided, in July 1901, that the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants could be 'sued in a corporate capacity for damages alleged to have been caused by the action of its officers'. The union thus had to pay £23,000 to the affected company to cover damages and costs. The Osborne judgement of 1909 ruled 'trade union expenditure for political purposes to be *ultra vires*', which 'appeared to threaten the [Labour] party's survival'. For the Taff Vale case, see Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 2*, pp. 314-315. For the Osborne judgement, see pp. 13-14. For more on the constitutionalism of the Labour party, see J. Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 15; M. Taylor, 'Labour and the constitution' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 151-156; Taylor, 'Ideology and policy', p. 6.

¹³ Taylor, 'Ideology and policy', p. 6. Indeed, Cronin has argued that there remained 'popular suspicion and resentment to state welfare' amongst working-class organisations after 1906. Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion*, p. 37.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Lords of Misrule*, p. 122.

¹⁵ For example, on the timidity of Liberal government proposals, on the introduction of labour exchanges, and on national health and unemployment insurance. Thane, 'Labour and welfare', p. 85.

shaped the tone of their respective political appeals. Portraying this state of affairs as a novel political development or as the outcome of a recent rise of class politics would require ignoring the similar relationship that existed between the Liberal party and the radical movement in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Furthermore, seeing liberal and labour activists as joint heirs of a shared trans-class political tradition overlooks the ideological and class-based tensions that so often characterised their relations during the Edwardian period. It is only by seeing the Bristol and Northampton LRCs as the descendants of a decidedly working-class radical tradition that we can fully explain their tone and their attitudes to the Liberal party in the years prior to 1914.

5.1 Bristol

By the time the Labour Representation Committee was formed in London in 1900, Bristol's own independent and trade union-based party, the BLEA, had almost entered its tenth year of existence.¹⁶ In 1907, the weak financial position of the BLEA, which had prevented the organisation from standing a parliamentary candidate at the 1906 general election, convinced its leading activists to join with the city's ILP branch in forming a more financially viable organisation: the Bristol Labour Representation Committee (BLRC).¹⁷ In terms of its organisational structure and compositional breadth, the BLRC represented an important step forward for the local labour movement.¹⁸ Even so, there was nothing particularly distinctive about its early political strategy. The BLRC, like every other labour party formed in Bristol since 1885, sought to achieve its central objective, increased labour representation, on strictly independent lines.¹⁹ Even those in the Bristol radical movement before 1885 had formed class-based organisations for this purpose, although their attitudes towards the Liberal party were, admittedly, more conciliatory. Moreover, the most commonly articulated justification for forming the BLRC, namely, that the local Liberal party refused to adopt working-class candidates, had been a frequent

¹⁶ Atkinson, *Trade Unions in Bristol*, p. 26. In electoral terms, the BLEA had achieved little of note. S. Bryher, *An account of the Labour and Socialist movement in Bristol: Part 3* (Bristol, 1931), p. 6.

¹⁷ After a protracted negotiation process, representatives from the trades' council, affiliated trade unions, and the ILP decided to form the BLRC, and affiliate with the national Labour party. As it was the local cell of the SDF, which was not affiliated to the Labour party, the BSS remained aloof. Letter G.H. Voisey (secretary of Bristol Trades' Council) to J. R. Macdonald, 19 February 1903, LHA LP/LRC/7/108; Letter G.H. Voisey to J. R. Macdonald, 7 March 1903, LHA LP/LRC/7/109; Letter J. R. Macdonald to W. Hornidge, 2 April 1903, LHA LP/LRC/LB/1/395; Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 3*, p. 6; Notes on formation of LRC in Bristol, LSECOOKE 37/28.

¹⁸ See Letter J. A. Cunningham to Labour Party Head Office, 19 March 1905, LHA LP/LRC/21/39/2.

¹⁹ The rules of the BLRC stated that it desired representation 'independent of either political party'. Rules of the Bristol LRC, BRO 32080/TC1/6/5.

complaint of both radical and labour activists in the city for more than three decades. In Bristol at least, old political strategies proved to be entirely relevant for the next generation of labour activists.

The conservatism of the Bristol Liberal party and its unwillingness to consider the demands of the trade union movement strengthened labour activists' belief in an independent political strategy.²⁰ The views and the class backgrounds of local Liberal MPs also did little to convince them to return to the Liberal fold. The Eton-educated Charles Hobhouse, who represented the predominantly working-class constituency of Bristol East between 1900 and 1918, was one of the most fervent Cabinet-level critics of Lloyd George and his social reformist policy.²¹ Augustine Birrell, who represented Bristol North between 1906 and 1918, also opposed increased government intervention because, as he stated in 1908, it would mean 'the disruption of the Liberal Party'.²² The conservative nature of Bristol Liberal politics was also evident at a municipal level where, on more than one occasion, Liberals joined forces with the Conservatives to oust Labour councillors.²³ In these circumstances, it was perhaps not surprising that labour activists considered rapprochement with the Liberal party to be both unlikely and undesirable.

An independent outlook had become so entrenched amongst labour activists that even the social reformist character of the Edwardian Liberal government failed to win them back. For example, although William Whitefield of the Bristol Miners' Association acknowledged the advanced nature of the 1906 Liberal government, he thanked the 'the advanced Labour minds of the country', not the Liberal party, for the progressive nature of its programme. For Whitefield, the significance of the election was not to be found in the Liberal landslide but in the fact that the House of Commons now contained '54 men direct from the ranks of Labour'.²⁴ The growing influence of the ILP in Bristol further strengthened the independent tone of labour politics. Reorganised in 1906 after its dissolution in the midst of the Boer War, the ILP became the political home for those who favoured affiliating local organisations to the national Labour party.²⁵ The members and leaders of the local ILP took the

²⁰ For example, in 1906, the Liberals rejected the suggestion of the Bristol Miners' Association to stand a labour candidate. *WDP*, 26 November 1902; 2 December 1902.

²¹ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, pp. 291; 299.

²² 'The Report of the Bristol "Right-to-Work" Committee, 1908', LSECOOKE 37/177.

²³ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 3*, p. 1; *WDP*, 2 November 1909; Charles Pitt municipal candidate materials, 8 November 1909, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/1.

²⁴ 'Annual Report of the Bristol Miners' Association, 1906', LSECOOKE 37/156; *BWM*, 10 March 1906.

²⁵ Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour Party*, p. 386; BILP M, 11 December 1906, LSEILP FILM 86.

'independent' in its name particularly seriously and became vocal critics of those who veered away from this principle. For instance, in 1908, the branch threatened to expel those candidates who stood on platforms of organisations not eligible for affiliation to the Labour party.²⁶ Political independence was so important for ILP branch members that, in 1909, they allowed their delegate to the national conference a free hand on all questions, except one. Their delegate must, they insisted, oppose 'any advice ... to vote Liberal at next election'.²⁷

While this strategy did not yield significant electoral success for the BLRC before 1914, there was no question among its members that it should abandon the struggle for independent representation.²⁸ Activists' belief in the validity of their strategy even survived the labour unrest that shook Bristol and other urban centres between 1910 and 1914.²⁹ Strikes emanating from rank-and-file initiatives reinvigorated the trade union movement in the city and convinced a minority of its leaders to adopt a more militant political perspective.³⁰ Yet, in contrast to Liverpool and the South Wales coalfields, there is no evidence of any syndicalist influence in Bristol.³¹ Far from convincing labour activists to abandon their old strategies, the industrial unrest merely served to strengthen the movement for lawfully obtained political representation. In the midst of the strike wave in 1911, an unprecedented number of candidates stood for the BLRC at the municipal elections.³² In 1914, the BLRC commenced its campaign for the anticipated 1915 general election, during which they sought to challenge the 'reactionary' Hobhouse in Bristol East.³³ Even those who embraced a more oppositional political rhetoric, such as Josh Widdicombe of the trades' council, remained committed to political methods of

²⁶ BILP M, 11 November 1908, LSEILP FILM 86.

²⁷ Letter C. Pitt to A. Cooke, 1909, LSECOOKE 37/19.

²⁸ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 218. The party came third in the Bristol East parliamentary election in January 1910. At the municipal elections in November of that year, its representation on the City Council fell from seven to four. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 299; Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* p. 146; WDP, 2 November 1910.

²⁹ Atkinson, *Trade Unions in Bristol*, pp. 17-22. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society*, p. 147.

³⁰ Atkinson, *Trade Unions in Bristol*, pp. 19-20; WDP, 6 February 1914: In the 1914 annual report of the trades' council, Widdicombe spoke of 'class war' and the 'fight between Capital and Labour'.

³¹ Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 219; Whitfield, 'Trade Unionism in Bristol', p. 77; Atkinson, *Trade Unions in Bristol*, p. 18; BO, 4 January 1913. B. Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914: Myths and Realities* (London, 1976), pp. 80; 90. Kenneth Morgan has suggested that the syndicalist influence in South Wales has been 'greatly overstated' by previous historians. Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour', p. 171.

³² NUBSO MR, November 1911, MRC 547/P/1/27; BO, 8 November 1913. Labour representation on the City Council grew from four in 1910 to eight in 1913.

³³ WDP, 2 May 1914.

reform.³⁴ The majority of labour activists continued to see political independence, which had formed a central aspect of both working-class radical and labour politics since the early 1870s, as the most effective political strategy for the BLRC in the Edwardian era.

When they engaged in independent political activity, labour activists frequently used a language of class to appeal to their target constituency. Indeed, the example of Bristol demonstrates that contrary to the liberal revisionist argument, class could play a significant role in shaping labour politics in the Edwardian period.³⁵ For example, members of the BLRC and its immediate precursor, the BLEA, placed a strong emphasis on the class background of their candidates, and often appealed directly to the working-class section of the electorate. They also used a language of class in their critiques of rival organisations. Above all, they condemned the two major parties for their unrepresentative class basis and for selecting electoral candidates almost exclusively from the middle- and upper-classes. This is not to suggest that labour activists embraced the politics of class *struggle*. On occasions, their language was far from conciliatory towards employers, especially during the labour unrest after 1910. There was also a slight yet discernible increase in condemnations of employers as a class. These sentiments, though, remained the preserve of a small minority of predominantly socialist activists. As it had been in the years before 1900, the most commonly articulated conception of class among labour activists in Bristol was one that acknowledged class distinctions but rejected class conflict.

Older activists, such as William Whitefield of the BMA, inherited this view of class and class relations from the radical movement in which they had served their political apprenticeships. However, younger activists, including Ernest Bevin of the Dockers' Union, understood the social order in similar terms. It was common, for example, for both old and young labour activists to draw attention to the working-class composition, leadership, and focus of their organisations. In fact, appeals to members of other classes were almost entirely absent from activists' political language during this period. Instead, they frequently and proudly declared that their organisations had been formed by trade unionists exclusively for the benefit of the working class. In his contribution to the national Labour party's first annual report, J.

³⁴ *WDP*, 18 February 1913; 27 February 1914. He argued that political action was one of the 'forces of Labour' that the Labour party should use 'in open warfare against capitalism and its systems'.

³⁵ Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 4; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, p. 11; Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 5; 335.

A. Cunnington of the BLEA stated that his organisation had selected its leaders from among the trade unions and had decided that all electoral candidates 'must be wage workers'.³⁶ Cunnington was not alone in highlighting the class composition of local labour organisations. In 1909, Arthur Cooke of the ILP explained that the Bristol Right to Work committee, founded a year earlier, consisted 'entirely of working men and women'.³⁷ Furthermore, when discussing the class composition of the BLRC in 1913, Josh Widdicombe, a colleague of Cooke's in the ILP, claimed that the party was in a 'better position to know, and to represent, the needs of the wage-earners' because it was composed of 'bona fide worker[s]' like himself.³⁸

Using class to motivate their chosen constituency was not the sole preserve of the trade unionist section of the BLRC. That Cunnington, Cooke, and Widdicombe were also members of socialist organisations precludes any simplistic characterisation of labour politics as divided between class-conscious trade unionists on the one hand and socially inclusive socialists on the other. The two main socialist organisations in Bristol at this time, the BSS and the ILP, were both trade unionist in orientation and composition. They also contained numerous members who were just as unequivocal about the class character of their movement as their non-socialist allies. The ILP's municipal candidates regularly placed a strong emphasis on their class backgrounds and often claimed to know the experiences and travails of their fellow workers. As John James Milton's election card from 1912 proclaimed, ILP candidates 'gladly avow[ed]' themselves as trade unionists. The card also appealed to working-class voters' sense of social exclusion by urging them to 'Vote that *us* workers who are called the Bottom Dog shall be on Top on the 1st of November'.³⁹ Charles Pitt's municipal campaign in 1910 went further in its exclusivist appeal to working-class voters. If elected, Pitt confirmed that he would be on the workers' side in all cases because 'the workers' side was the right side always'.⁴⁰

Rather than using vocabulary that appealed to a socially broad spectrum of voters, labour activists and candidates in Bristol appealed to working-class voters on explicit class terms. For example, when they discussed the merits of the national

³⁶ Macdonald, *The Labour Party Foundation Conference and Annual Conference Reports*, p. 24; Letter J. A. Cunnington to Labour Party Head Office, 10 October 1902, LHA LP/LRC/11/78.

³⁷ Letter A. Cooke to J. R. Macdonald, 17 January 1909, LHA LP/MAC/08/1/177.

³⁸ *WDP*, 18 February 1913.

³⁹ Election card of John James Milton, 1912, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/11; See also Election card of F. F. Clothier, 1913, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/13.

⁴⁰ *WDP*, 15 October 1910. Walter Ayles, an ILP councillor, also argued that 'the supreme question before them must be the economic and industrial position of the worker'. *WDP*, 2 May 1914.

Labour party, they rarely focused on the benefits it could provide for the community as a whole. Instead, they tended to emphasise its trade unionist composition, the social background of its MPs, and its proposed solutions to the problems faced by workers.⁴¹ Even Robert Sharland of the BSS, an organisation that, at this time, refused to join the Bristol LRC, spoke positively of the Labour party because it was the 'best and quickest way to get the starving children fed, [for] finding of work for the unemployed and [for] the general uplift of the workers'.⁴² Class exclusivist sentiments of this kind also pervaded the LRC's literature during the January 1910 election contest. Throughout the campaign, the *Bristol Labour Herald* tried to convince trade unionist voters that Labour was, in its composition and focus, a fundamentally unique political party.⁴³ It did so by drawing attention to the divergent backgrounds of the Labour candidate Frank Sheppard, a local shoemaker, and the Liberal Charles Hobhouse, who the *Herald* characterised as 'the gentleman; the land squire; the man of education, the product of ages of public school influence'.⁴⁴ While articles in the *Herald* did at times appeal to non-class identities such as religion, these were exceptions to the rule. As the penultimate edition of the *Herald* proclaimed, 'Workers [this was] Your Battle!'⁴⁵

During this period, 'the workers' was one of the most common terms used by labour activists in Bristol. Ambiguous terms, though, did not disappear entirely from their political vocabulary. As before 1900, they tended to provide terms such as 'the people' with more class-specific meanings by using them in conjunction with narrow terms. Examples of this can be found in labour candidates' literature and public speeches. The leaflets produced for the municipal elections of 1912, for example, demanded 'Houses for *the People*' so that '*the workers* can live happy lives'.⁴⁶ During his parliamentary campaign in January 1910, Frank Sheppard told voters that they could 'bring about better and happier lives for the *masses of the people*' by sending 'people of *their own class*' to represent them.⁴⁷ Herbert Geater of the Dockers' Union provided a particularly succinct summary of this view in 1912 when he told a large

⁴¹ For examples, see Letter 'W. Whitefield, Miners' Agent' to *WDP*, 26 April 1904; 'Annual Report of the Bristol Miners' Association, 1906', LSECOOKE 37/156.

⁴² Letter R. Sharland to H. Quelch, 10 March 1905, LHA LP/MAC/08/1/1-2.

⁴³ *BLH*, 2 April 1910, BRO 11171.

⁴⁴ Frank Sheppard's election card January 1910, BRO 11171; *BLH*, 4 January 1910, BRO 11171.

⁴⁵ *BLH*, 4 January 1910, BRO 11171: For example, one article was headed 'An appeal to Christian men'.

⁴⁶ "'Bristol's Next Step" by Walter Ayles', 1912, LSEILP ILP/5/1912/3: Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ *WDP*, 14 January 1910: Emphasis added.

meeting of workers that the only government possible was one of 'the nation by the nation'. 'And you', he declared, 'are the nation'.⁴⁸

Labour activists in Bristol, therefore, continued to use class in a sectarian way. However, they also continued to deny accusations that they sought to provoke class conflict. As the president of the trades' council explained in 1908, the Labour party did not 'advocate a class war' and nor did it propose 'class legislation'.⁴⁹ To be sure, labour activists justified their political activity by claiming that the working class had unique grievances that could only be resolved by organising on a class basis. At the same time, and often in the same speech or article, they stressed the conciliatory nature of their activity. For example, in a letter to the local press in 1903, John Gregory of the NUBSO acknowledged that capital and labour had distinctive interests, but argued that they could, and should, work together in an 'industrial partnership for the common good'.⁵⁰ Robert Bishop, also of the NUBSO, made a similar argument at a meeting of shoemakers two years later. Although he suggested that workers should look after their own interests by demanding a 'fair share of the results of their labour', Bishop maintained that he 'had not the slightest desire, by word or action, to injure particular employers of labour'. Even when employers had acted in an unjust manner, Bishop advised workers to use methods that did not involve 'unkindly action', 'strife', or 'unpleasantness'.⁵¹ Labour activists did not consider class-based political activity as antagonistic towards other classes, but as a way of resolving the political and industrial inequalities that existed in Edwardian society. As 'A Working Man' wrote in 1903, 'we do not desire to be at enmity with any class ... but we are not prepared to submit our necks tamely to every turn of the political screw'.⁵²

This non-conflictual sense of class survived the labour unrest that engulfed Bristol after 1910. Some activists, such as Josh Widdicombe of the BLRC, adopted a more antagonistic tone in their public statements. Yet, there is little evidence to suggest that these views represented those of the great mass of the city's trade unionists. They certainly did not represent the views held by most leaders of the BLRC and its affiliated organisations. William Whitefield challenged Widdicombe's views in a letter to the *Western Daily Press*, during which he stated that they were

⁴⁸ *WDP*, 27 May 1912. See also Letter 'S. Gough' to *WDP*, 22 January 1910, *WDP*, 2 May 1914.

⁴⁹ *WDP*, 12 May 1908.

⁵⁰ Letter John Gregory to local press, 1903, UBSC DM/741/1.

⁵¹ Meeting reported in NUBSO MR, October 1905, MRC 547/P/1/21.

⁵² Letter 'Working Man' to *WDP*, 29 September 1903.

not 'a true reflex of the desires and feelings of the Bristol workers of the L. R. C.'.⁵³ The ILP's Arthur Cooke also opposed the notion of 'the class war', which he considered to be one of the underlying principles of the rival BSS.⁵⁴ To some extent, this was an unfair assessment of the BSS, as some members, such as J. A. Cunnington, expressed their opposition to 'anything which put class against class'.⁵⁵ The divisions between those who advocated class war and those who favoured class peace in Bristol cut across organisational boundaries. This was not, though, a division between two equally widespread conceptions of the social order. Antagonistic statements were, still, exceptions to the rule, even during the labour unrest after 1910. Among the leaders, activists, and supporters of the labour movement in Bristol, class identity was strong but class opposition was not.

The configuration of this class identity also changed little during the Edwardian period despite a number of significant developments involving 'other' categories of worker. For example, the importance of women in Bristol's workforce grew as sectors with high concentrations of female labour, such as the clothing and food processing industries, expanded rapidly. In 1908 and 1909, unemployment in the city was worse than it had been since the 1880s, particularly among dockers and transport workers. The migration of rural labourers into the city also continued to such an extent that, by 1911, over a third of Bristol's population had been born outside of the city.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the outburst of industrial militancy after 1910 led trade unionists, especially those in the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, to consider working more closely with foreign workers.⁵⁷ On all these questions, male labour leaders outwardly expressed their sympathy and solidarity and proposed a number of solutions to the problems faced by other workers. Behind these formal commitments, though, lay highly qualified conceptions of the working class. In their written literature and verbal statements, leading labour activists continued to use terms and expressions that reinforced, rather than reduced, the distinctions between different categories of worker. As we have seen, these terms and expressions, and the assumptions about gender, work, place, and nationality that underpinned them,

⁵³ Letter 'W. Whitefield' to *WDP*, 2 March 1914.

⁵⁴ Notes on experiences in Bristol, 20 March 1912, LSECOOKE 37/1. Ernest Bevin was initially drawn to the BSS because of its 'revolutionist spirit'. A. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Volume One: Trade Union Leader, 1881-1940* (London, 1960), p. 15.

⁵⁵ *WDP*, 3 November 1910.

⁵⁶ J. Lynch, *A Tale of Three Cities: Comparative Studies in Working-Class Life* (London, 1998), pp. 11-12; 33; 139; Whitfield, 'Trade Unionism in Bristol', p. 68.

⁵⁷ *WDP*, 11 April 1911.

had formed a major part of both working-class radical and labour identities since at least the 1870s. The survival of these assumptions into the Edwardian era, therefore, suggests that there were significant continuities in the way labour activists understood themselves and the class to which they belonged.

The restrictive nature of this identity was apparent in the way labour activists continued to marginalise the female section of the workforce. Although they often complained of the poor wages and conditions of female workers, and while they offered their support to the principle of women's suffrage, leaders of the predominantly male trade union movement continued to use highly gendered terms in their political discourse.⁵⁸ For instance, annual reports of the trades' council made explicit appeals to the 'Trade Unionist and Labour *Man*'.⁵⁹ Due to the changing composition of the workforce, male labour activists did begin to direct some of their appeals to women workers. Yet, even when they did so, they still tended to couch these appeals in terms that emphasised the otherness of female labour and their distinctiveness from, rather than their shared interests with, male workers. This was particularly the case when they discussed the question of unemployment. In its official literature, the Bristol Right to Work committee associated the unemployment question almost exclusively with the male worker, and even advocated the abolition of married female labour as a possible solution to the problem.⁶⁰ In one leaflet, they acknowledged the existence of unemployment amongst both men and women but quickly moved on to argue that 'every *man* willing to work [should] possess the right to work'.⁶¹ The electoral literature produced by the BLRC also discussed unemployment in gendered terms. In a leaflet produced in 1912, one section entitled 'The Man' spoke of unemployment while another section labelled 'The Woman' spoke only of constructing hostels as a 'partial prevention from ruin of those women and girls who are homeless'.⁶² By drawing a sharp contrast between the experiences and the interests of 'The Man' and 'The Woman' in this way, this literature merely served to reinforce the view that unemployment was essentially a male problem. As Frank Sheppard argued in 1909, 'nobody could understand what unemployment meant ... except the working *man*'.⁶³

⁵⁸ *BO*, 26 April 1913; *WDP*, 20 February 1914; *BO*, 18 July 1914; Lynch, *A Tale of Three Cities*, pp. 11; 15.

⁵⁹ BTC AR, 1906, BRO 32080/TC1/4/13: Emphasis added.

⁶⁰ *WDP*, 14 March 1910.

⁶¹ Bristol 'Right to Work' Committee leaflet, 1908, LSECOOKE 37/176: Emphasis added.

⁶² John James Milton Election Card 1912, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/11. See also Election card of Albert H. Tyack, 1912, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/8.

⁶³ *WDP*, 13 January 1909: Emphasis added.

The prominent place afforded to the unemployment question should not obscure the fact that labour activists continued to see certain sections of the unemployed as a threat to their own position. While the trades' council and socialist organisations sought to speak for the unemployed in a general sense, mainly through the vehicle of the Bristol Right to Work committee, they still distinguished between its deserving and undeserving sections.⁶⁴ Harold Brabham of the Gasworkers' Union, for instance, supported the idea of a relief fund for the unemployed but hoped that relief would only get into the hands of 'deserving workmen'.⁶⁵ This tendency to draw a distinction between those worthy and those unworthy of support was even apparent among those who worked on the Right to Work committee. In a report published by the organisation in 1908, the co-authors, Ernest Bevin and Arthur Cooke, felt it necessary to deny rumours that the majority of cases of unemployment in Bristol involved 'wastrels' or 'unemployables'.⁶⁶ This contrast was neatly summarised by 'Chef', a frequent socialist letter writer to the *Western Daily Press* who was most probably Cooke himself.⁶⁷ In defending socialism from his liberal detractors, 'Chef' denied that socialists placed 'unemployed and unemployable' upon the same basis. The 'unemployable' were, he explained, a minority who should be 'dealt with separately'.⁶⁸

Throughout this period, labour activists also continued to emphasise, both implicitly and explicitly, the differences between urban and rural workers. As before 1900, there remained an enduring sense of nostalgia within labour circles about their rural heritage, which was most noticeable in activists' choice of songs at political meetings.⁶⁹ Again, however, they still believed that the concerns of rural workers were fundamentally different from those of urban workers. In particular, trade unionists in Bristol continued to see rural workers as a threat to their own position.

⁶⁴ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 12. The Labour party introduced several Right to Work bills in the House of Commons before 1914. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, pp. 54-55. Ben Jackson suggests that national Labour politicians adopted a similar position towards 'loafers' and 'shirkers'. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left*, p. 46.

⁶⁵ *BWM*, 14 January 1905.

⁶⁶ 'The Report of the Bristol "Right-to-Work" Committee, 1908', LSECOOKE 37/177. See also 'Notes on the unemployed problem', LSECOOKE 37/203.

⁶⁷ Apart from the obvious association between the terms 'Chef' and 'Cook/e', there are numerous similarities between the writing styles employed by 'Chef' in his letters and the notebooks written by Cooke.

⁶⁸ Letter 'Chef' to *WDP*, 12 October 1905; Letter 'Chef' to *WDP*, 17 October 1905.

⁶⁹ Labour songs compiled by the BSS, BRO 37886/2/1/3. A number of labour activists, such as Ernest Bevin and Frank Sheppard, were themselves rural migrants to Bristol. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Volume One*, pp. 5; 57; C. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: the politics of rural Britain, 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2007), p. 25. For more on 'agrarian romanticism' and urban nostalgia for a 'mythical lost age', see Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the Land', pp. 127-144.

In 1900, John Curle of the trades' council blamed the depopulation of agricultural districts for worsening unemployment, and offered a number of solutions that, he believed, would stop the 'overcrowding process in the cities'.⁷⁰ This attitude was so prevalent among local labour activists that it became a central part of Frank Sheppard's parliamentary campaign in 1910. While promoting life in the countryside as a way to build up 'sturdy manhood', one of Sheppard's election pamphlets blamed 'the continued stream of our people from the country districts' for the 'congestion in our big cities'. As a solution, the Bristol LRC proposed a 'vigorous' policy of 'back to the land', foreshadowing the demands put forward by the Labour party's Land Committee in 1913.⁷¹

Labour activists also continued to hold restrictive views about non-British workers. Officially, they expressed their solidarity with the international working class, especially when they attended annual May Day demonstrations.⁷² However, behind these formal commitments to working-class internationalism stood a set of restrictive assumptions about race and nationality.⁷³ Thus, while they offered their sympathy with the plight and the struggles of foreign workers, they strenuously sought protection from them in the labour market.⁷⁴ In 1911, Charles Jarman of the local National Sailors' and Firemen's Union branch argued that sailors must look to international action to prevent shipowners from 'putting the seamen of one country against the seamen of another'. In the same year, he used unambiguously racial terms when criticising those shipowners who, he claimed, had 'flooded the vessels with Chinamen', or 'Ching-Changs' as he referred to them, and who had lowered the wages of British sailors.⁷⁵ Other sections of the Bristol labour movement joined in with this condemnation of the employment of 'Asiatics' on British ships, including

⁷⁰ *WDP*, 24 March 1900; *BWM*, 15 July 1905.

⁷¹ A report by the Land Committee of the Labour Party published in the *BO*, 21 June 1913. Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the Land', p. 129.

⁷² Bryher, *Part 2*, p. 61.

⁷³ Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 97-101; 107. For examples of working class patriotism during the Boer War, see I. Sharpe, 'Empire, Patriotism and the Working-Class Electorate: The 1900 General Election in the Battersea Constituency', *Parliamentary History*, 28/3 (2009), pp. 392-412.

⁷⁴ For Kenneth Lunn, 'accusations of undercutting' were 'commonplace' during this period. See K. Lunn, 'Immigrants and Strikes: Some British Case Studies 1870-1914' in K. Lunn (ed.), *Race and Labour in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1985), p. 37. See also Tabili, "'We ask for British Justice'", p. 47.

⁷⁵ *WDP*, 11 April 1911; 15 June 1911; 19 June 1911. J. P. May has argued that 'the most organised and lasting opposition' towards the Chinese in Britain came from British seamen. May, 'The Chinese in Britain', pp. 115-116. Sascha Auerbach notes how British trade union leaders portrayed Chinese labourers as being 'immoral, feminized, mutinous, sexually deviant and mercenary, whereas their British counterparts were described as masculine, virtuous, and patriotic'. Auerbach, *Race, Law, and "The Chinese Puzzle"*, pp. 3; 18; 32; 37. See also Tabili, "'We ask for British Justice'", p. 82.

those in the local ILP.⁷⁶ By the middle of 1914, Jarman had begun to threaten that sailors would down tools unless the 'Chinese were debarred from serving'.⁷⁷ There was little sense, for labour activists in Bristol at least, that the working class was becoming increasingly homogenised during this period. Rather, deep-rooted assumptions about nationality, as well as entrenched attitudes towards women, agricultural labourers, and certain sections of the unemployed, continued to shape the class identity of local labour activists throughout the Edwardian era.

The Bristol LRC's use of class and class identity in its political appeals provided progressively minded voters in Bristol with a genuine electoral choice before 1914. The party also presented voters with a political programme that was markedly different from that of the local Liberal party. Whereas Liberal leaders in Bristol remained wary of state involvement in the economy, labour activists largely embraced the idea of using the state to ameliorate the conditions of the workers. Still, while they included a wide range of statist demands in their programmes, there was nothing particularly novel about the collectivist accent of their ideology. After all, local labour activists had favoured collectivism as a method of social organisation, and had included numerous statist proposals in their programmes, since the early 1880s. Moreover, they principally saw the state not as end in and of itself, but as an effective instrument that they could use to realise their historic goals, such as the expansion of democracy, the rebalancing of political and economic inequalities, and the protection of the rights of labour. For instance, after 1900, they advocated the right to work and a system of state pensions as a way to enhance the economic rights of the working class, and favoured the overturning of legal decisions, such as Taff Vale and the Osborne Judgement, in the name of defending the liberties of the trade unions. Although many of their demands were new, the core concepts that underpinned them were not.

Many of their demands, for example, continued to have a strong democratic and constitutionalist basis.⁷⁸ As before 1900, they understood these concepts through the lens of class and primarily associated them with the principle of labour representation.⁷⁹ During their election campaigns, they defended their advocacy of this principle by claiming that the working class, due to its numerical superiority, was

⁷⁶ BILP M, 12 July 1911, LSEILP FILM 86.

⁷⁷ *BO*, 25 April 1914.

⁷⁸ Jackson, *Equality and the British Left*, p. 24; Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought', pp. 14-15.

⁷⁹ Letter J. A. Cunnington to Labour Party Head Office, 6 July 1900, LHA LP/LRC/1/37: They were 'very keen on the subject' in Bristol.

entitled to a proportionate share of political power.⁸⁰ Frank Sheppard justified his parliamentary campaign in precisely these terms. Working men, he argued, should be free to select and send their own candidates to Parliament because 'as a class' they formed the 'largest number of people in the country'.⁸¹ Municipal candidates spoke in similar terms about representation on local bodies. 'Working People demand more Direct Labour Representation', read Charles Pitt's election leaflet in 1909, because the Bristol City Council at that time was composed of '84 Aldermen and Councillors representing the propertied classes, as against 8 from the ranks of the Workers'.⁸² In this view, as one activist explained in 1906, the greater involvement of working-class representatives in formal political life would make existing institutions 'purely representative and thoroughly democratic'.⁸³

The desire for 'purely representative' institutions indicates the endurance of radical ideas about the English constitution. More specifically, it suggests that labour activists, like their radical ancestors, saw political inequalities as subversions of the true meaning of the constitution. In their view, the constitution granted to every section of the community certain political and industrial rights, such as the right to be represented on governing bodies and the right to a 'fair share of the results of their labour'.⁸⁴ As previous chapters have demonstrated, this conception of rights was far from new for labour and, before them, working-class radical activists. Indeed, like their predecessors, labour activists continued to see independent political action, combined with powerful and effective trade unions, as the most effective way of defending and extending these rights. For example, in 1906, William Whitefield argued that the presence of Labour MPs in Parliament would secure 'the fullest measure of justice for Labour' by strengthening the 'just rights' of the workers.⁸⁵ While Edwardian labour activists extended the concept of rights by including the 'right to work' as one of the rights of labour, this represented a reinterpretation of one of labourism's core concepts rather than a fundamental change in its conceptual framework.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Letter 'J. A. Cunnington' to *WDP*, 4 November 1902; Letter 'J. A. Cunnington' to *WDP*, 11 August 1903; Letter 'Working Man' to *WDP*, 29 September 1903.

⁸¹ *WDP*, 13 January 1909.

⁸² Election leaflet of Charles Pitt, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/3.

⁸³ Letter 'Democrat' to *WDP*, 18 December 1906.

⁸⁴ See NUBSO MR Oct 1905; *WDP*, 12 May 1908; Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Volume One*, p. 17.

⁸⁵ 'Annual Report of the Bristol Miners' Association, 1906', LSECOOKE 37/156; Election leaflet of W. Whitefield, 1909, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/4.

⁸⁶ Bristol 'Right to Work' Committee leaflet, 1908, LSECOOKE 37/176.

A commitment to the English constitution and to constitutional methods of reform also survived the pre-war labour unrest.⁸⁷ Even as they offered support to rank-and-file initiatives, labour activists repeatedly sought to give these actions a veneer of respectability. For example, in 1911, Ernest Bevin of the Dockers' Union told striking dockers that while he supported their activities, they must remember to select 'sensible men' to lead them.⁸⁸ During this period, trade union leaders like Bevin tried to direct workers' anger into peaceful, lawful, and political channels. Though he sympathised with the strike movement, Frank Sheppard condemned those who chose 'mischief' over the 'paths of peaceful development'.⁸⁹ Herbert Geater, a colleague of Bevin's in the Dockers' Union, continued to stress the importance of political action in his speeches to the city's dock workers.⁹⁰ Sidney Plummer, also of the Dockers' Union, went so far as to claim that workers could use the power of voting to make Bristol 'a city of Paradise'.⁹¹ Despite an unprecedented level of extra-parliamentary militancy in the pre-war period, most labour activists in Bristol stubbornly refused to abandon their commitment to the parliamentary method of reform.

During the same period, they also continued to invoke the concepts of rights and liberty when defending their political and industrial demands. For example, the singing of labour hymns such as 'Banners of Freedom' and 'Marching on to Liberty' remained a regular feature of labour and socialist meetings.⁹² Activists also regularly drew upon the themes of oppression, tyranny, and freedom in their political speeches, such as in 1911 when Herbert Geater described the dock strike as part of a wider fight for 'those liberties [that] their forefathers [had] won for them'.⁹³ In 1912, Ernest Bevin condemned the actions of 'tyrannical masters' and portrayed Tom Mann, a labour leader who had been arrested in an act of 'judicial tyranny', as one of the 'great fighters for liberty'.⁹⁴ The concept of liberty, as well as those of democracy, constitutionalism, and rights, thus remained at the core of labourist ideology in Edwardian Bristol.

⁸⁷ *WDP*, 12 February 1906: Speech by E. J. Burt, president of the trades' council.

⁸⁸ *WDP*, 14 July 1911.

⁸⁹ NUBSO MR, October 1912, MRC 547/P/1/28.

⁹⁰ *WDP*, 28 August 1911.

⁹¹ *WDP*, 13 June 1912.

⁹² BILP M, 16 September 1908; 1 September 1909, LSEILP FILM 86; See also John Gregory's poetry: 'New Labour Song', 1902, UBSC DM/741/1.

⁹³ *WDP*, 28 August 1911.

⁹⁴ *WDP*, 27 May 1912; 11 June 1912.

There was little movement in the adjacent band of labourist morphology during this period. As we have seen, the concepts of class and the state continued to shape the articulation of labourism's core concepts. This helps to explain why the political programmes adopted by the Bristol LRC included such a wide range of statist proposals, such as the nationalisation of coalmines and railways, a non-contributory state pension, and the state provision of work for the unemployed.⁹⁵ During the 1910 election contest, the *Bristol Labour Herald* even suggested that the Labour party was the only one that stood for the application of the principle of collectivism.⁹⁶ Yet, while the collectivist tenor of labour programmes may have become stronger, labourism was still distinct from the various forms of Edwardian socialism.⁹⁷ Local socialists such as Walter Ayles of the ILP tended to speak of collectivism in highly emotive terms. It was, he claimed, a step towards the socialist 'ideal' that would 'lift humanity' to a 'higher level of life' based on 'justice and love'.⁹⁸ Proponents of labourism, on the other hand, interpreted collectivism in more pragmatic terms and argued that it was simply the most practical and efficient means of achieving their economic objectives.⁹⁹ As Frank Freeman of the BLRC stated in 1910, the Labour party was composed of 'practical men...not dreamers'.¹⁰⁰ It is not hard to identify these 'practical men' in the Bristol labour movement. Charles Gill of the Bristol Miners' Association, for instance, proposed the nationalisation of the coal mines as a way to increase the wages of Bristol miners.¹⁰¹ Frank Sheppard expressed similarly pragmatic sentiments when discussing railway nationalisation in 1910. At one of his election campaign meetings, he justified his support for this policy by pointing to the example of Germany, where, due to state control of the railways, they were able to despatch goods to England at prices less than from Bristol to London.¹⁰² This was not the voice of an ethical and universalist socialism, but that of a pragmatic, flexible,

⁹⁵ Letter 'J. A. Cunnington, Hon. Sec. of Labour Electoral Association' to *WDP*, 28 September 1900; BTC AR, 1907, BRO 32080/TC1/4/14; Bristol 'Right to Work' Committee leaflet, 1908, LSECOOKE 37/176. See also Election leaflet of Charles Pitt, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/3; Election leaflet of Frank Freeman, 1909, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/6; Election leaflet of W. Whitefield, 1909, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/4; Election card of Albert H. Tyack, 1912, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/8; "'Bristol's Next Step" by Walter Ayles', 1912, LSEILP ILP/5/1912/3; Four-page pamphlet for Frank Sheppard's election campaign, BRO 11171.

⁹⁶ *BLH*, 2 April 1910, BRO 11171.

⁹⁷ Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought*, p. 41.

⁹⁸ General Secretary's MR, 4 November 1912, LSEILP ILP/5/1912/8; Election card of John James Milton, 1912, LSEILP ILP/6/21/1/11.

⁹⁹ For example, one of Bevin's biographers explained that despite his 'hostility to the economic and social system', the 'cast of [Bevin's] mind was practical rather than revolutionary of utopian' during the pre-war unrest. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Volume One*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁰ *WDP*, 17 November 1910.

¹⁰¹ *WDP*, 4 January 1912.

¹⁰² *WDP*, 14 January 1910.

and collectivist form of labourism. As Sheppard explained in 1912, 'work and wages for men that are victimised, security for the Saturday nights-that is what is wanted'.¹⁰³

5.2 Northampton

The formation of the Northampton Labour Representation Council (NLRC) in 1914 proved to be an important event in Northampton's political history. For the first time, labour and socialist activists from the local trades' council, the ILP, and the British Socialist Party (BSP, formerly the SDF) agreed to work together in a single political organisation for a common purpose.¹⁰⁴ At the time, however, most labour activists did not consider this development to be a decisive break with their past political strategy. As we have seen, working-class radicals and their labour successors had formed a distinctive and, at times, intransigent political subculture in the town long before 1914. Furthermore, like their nineteenth-century precursors, most activists in the NLRC continued to favour a pragmatic liberal-labour alliance. Rather than embracing the independent tone that was characteristic of labour politics in Bristol, most labour activists in Northampton continued to adopt a cautious and conciliatory attitude towards the local Liberal party.

The progressive split in Northampton was, at this stage, far from decisive, sharp, or irrevocable. In part, this was due to the survival of a strong Lib-Lab current in labour politics. Lib-Lab activists, many of whom had been involved in the LRU-labour alliances of the 1880s and 1890s, continued to see alliance with the Liberal party as the most effective strategy for achieving the political and economic objectives of the broadly conceived labour party.¹⁰⁵ The progressive tone of Northampton liberalism before 1910 certainly strengthened their case. Firstly, during this period, the Liberal and Radical Association largely accommodated trade unionist demands for labour representation, and even selected Edward Poulton of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO) as the town's first working-class Mayor.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, the Liberals were progressive in their choice of allies. In contrast to Bristol, where the Liberals worked with the Conservatives to keep out

¹⁰³ NUBSO MR, October 1912, MRC 547/P/1/28.

¹⁰⁴ In 1908, the national SDF became the Social Democratic Party. In 1911, the party merged with smaller socialist groups to form the British Socialist Party. For the sake of clarity, this chapter will only refer to the SDF and BSP monikers.

¹⁰⁵ For examples, see NTC M, 21 October 1903; 28 December 1905; 16 January 1906, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC M, 15 December 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC2. For more on the survival of Lib-Labism among British trade unionists, see A. J. Reid, 'Labour and the trade unions' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 224-225.

¹⁰⁶ *NM*, 7 November 1902; NTC M, 21 November 1906, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; *NM*, 2 November 1906.

candidates to their left, Liberals in Northampton chose to develop a strategic electoral alliance with the town's SDF branch.¹⁰⁷ Finally, the progressive nature of the Liberal and Radical Association was reflected in its choice of parliamentary candidates. Herbert Paul, one of the town's MPs between 1906 and 1910, was a devoted Lloyd Georgeite who supported the Trade Disputes Bill, a miners' eight-hour day, and limited nationalisation.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Hastings Lees-Smith, elected in 1910, wished to combine the forces of Liberalism and Labour in favour of social reform, which he saw as the 'chief task for Liberals' in the years ahead.¹⁰⁹ For Lib-Lab activists, the ability to work comfortably with the progressive Liberal party meant that there was little need for a fiercely independent labour party in Northampton.

Yet, by autumn 1914, many of the town's Lib-Lab activists had helped to form the NLRC.¹¹⁰ While the NLRC's formation was an important local development, it would be erroneous to see it simply as an expression of deeper material changes. Essentially, it was the outcome of peculiarly local and overwhelmingly political developments. A split in the local BSP branch, which allowed the popular socialist militant James Gribble and his supporters to open discussions with the ILP and the trades' council, proved to be a crucial precondition for the NLRC's existence.¹¹¹ The rise to prominence of SDF and ILP activists in local trade union branches also helped to circulate the idea of an independent labour organisation amongst the town's labour leaders.¹¹² Moreover, it was primarily the government's response to industrial unrest after 1910, not the industrial unrest itself, which helped to convince Lib-Labs of the necessity of independent political action.¹¹³ While leading trade unionists

¹⁰⁷ *NDE*, 11 December 1909; *NM*, 17 December 1909; 21 October 1910; 21 April 1911; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 297: They also came close to agreeing a similar pact at a parliamentary level.

¹⁰⁸ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 293; *NM*, 15 January 1909; NTC AR, 1906, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹⁰⁹ *NI*, 5 January 1910.

¹¹⁰ NTC M, 22 April 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹¹¹ *NM*, 7 November 1913; 14 November 1913; 21 November 1913; *NI*, 24 October 1914. The BSP was the main obstacle to forming a Labour party during earlier discussions. See NTC M, 17 April 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC M, 30 November 1913; 21 October 1914; 16 December 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; *SP*, February 1915.

¹¹² In 1910, the trades' council had an SDP member as president and an ILP member as secretary. It is worth remembering, though, that the rise of socialists in the local labour movement did not necessarily represent a rise of socialism amongst local workers, as socialist activists largely obtained these positions by being effective and dedicated trade unionists and, in some cases, by simply turning up to meetings. NTC M, 18 November 1908, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC M, 16 March 1910, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹¹³ As in other industrial centres, Northampton experienced a wave of strikes after 1910 by railwaymen, brewery workers, leather workers, and those employed in the boot and shoe industry. In 1912, for example, there were thirty-nine unauthorised strikes in the local boot and shoe industry, compared to just five in 1911. *NM*, 18 August 1911; NUBSO MR, February 1912, MRC 547/P/1/28; *NM*, 24 January

condemned the actions of the employers, they reserved their most condemnatory language for the actions (and inactions) of local MPs and of the Liberal government.¹¹⁴ In this context, Daniel Stanton, the historically stubborn exemplar of Lib-Labism, sought to convince his fellow trades' council delegates to take a more active political role by running their own candidates in municipal elections.¹¹⁵

When we examine the reasons behind the NLRC's formation, as well as its composition, goals, and early focus, it becomes possible to see the party as a new manifestation of an old political tradition. There was, after all, nothing particularly distinctive about the NLRC's working-class focus or composition. Working-class radicals and labour activists in the mid-to-late Victorian period had also exhibited a class-based political identity that served to distinguish their movement from others in Northampton. They too had demanded increased labour representation on local and national governing bodies, and had pursued a conciliatory political strategy towards the Liberal party. In fact, while the NLRC sought to contest municipal elections on an independent basis, they did not initially seek to contest the Liberals' dominance at a parliamentary level.¹¹⁶ It also initially refused to affiliate to the national Labour party and planned to stand a candidate alongside the Liberals at the anticipated 1915 election.¹¹⁷ Even as they broke with the Liberal party, labour activists in Northampton struggled to discard their old political sympathies.

They also refused to abandon their long-held view of class and class relations.¹¹⁸ Throughout the Edwardian period, they continued to express a consciousness of being workers and still saw themselves as the spokespersons for the working-class section of the community. They also continued to appeal exclusively to the workers by promising them that, if elected, they would principally serve the class for which they claimed to speak. At the same time, and despite experiencing unprecedented structural change at the workplace, they also continued to favour class conciliation over class conflict. In their electoral campaigns, they

1913; 4 April 1913; 20 June 1913; NTC M, 18 June 1913, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; Brooker, 'Northampton Shoemakers' Reaction to Industrialisation', p. 159.

¹¹⁴ For examples, see NTC M, 20 September 1911; 16 October 1911; 15 November 1911; 19 November 1911; 20 March 1912; 17 April 1912; 16 July 1912; 5 October 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; *NM*, 20 June 1913.

¹¹⁵ NTC M, 16 August 1911; 16 October 1911; 18 October 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC M, 13 October 1913, NRO 1977/44/NTC3. NUBSO MR, May 1914, MRC 547/P/1/30.

¹¹⁶ NTC M, 22 April 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹¹⁷ J. Buckell, 'The Early Socialists in Northampton 1886-1924' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Leicester, 1977), p. 38; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 311.

¹¹⁸ Fox suggests that the decade after 1895 was 'the period of most rapid technical change' in the boot and shoe industry. Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 245.

advocated legislation for the benefit of the workers but denied that this was out of a sense of hostility to other classes. They condemned the class basis and the unrepresentative nature of governing bodies but did not deny the right of other sections of the community to a fair share of political representation. They also portrayed their industrial activities as a means through which to assert their just rights as workers.

Class exclusivity remained a crucial element in this conception of class relations. Trades' council delegates in particular repeatedly stressed the working-class basis and focus of their organisations. They regularly passed resolutions, recorded in the organisation's minute books and annual reports, which included caveats explaining that they had considered the question solely from 'the workers' point of view'.¹¹⁹ According to their annual reports, which were intended for a wider audience, trades' council delegates sought to improve 'the workers' welfare' by agitating for the betterment of 'the workers' conditions'.¹²⁰ There is little sense in these statements that delegates wished to speak for anyone other than the working class. Nor did they claim that their policies and activities would benefit other classes. Indeed, this sense of class exclusivity was enshrined in the trades' council's rulebook in 1907. It informed delegates that they were expected to speak with authority on any question that 'interest[ed] the Workers'. They must become acquainted with 'those things that will tend to promote the comfort and happiness of their class' and must work towards gaining 'not only our natural rights as men, but our earnings as workers'.¹²¹

Activists refused to moderate this exclusionary language when they entered the political arena. For example, when he stood as a Liberal candidate alongside an employer in 1902, Daniel Stanton admitted that he primarily aimed to serve the class to which he belonged.¹²² The electoral literature produced by the local SDF branch, which was overwhelmingly trade unionist in composition, also portrayed its candidates as authentic members of the working class. At the 1906 general election, its leaflets suggested that the socialist candidates could 'represent *our* class better than any member of any other class' because they were 'members of the working-

¹¹⁹ NTC M, 3 May 1905, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1908, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹²⁰ NTC AR, 1900, MRC MSS.524/4/1/25; NTC AR, 1901, MRC MSS.524/4/1/25; NTC M, 14 July 1902, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1904, MSS.524/4/1/32.

¹²¹ NTC Rulebook, 1907, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; NTC AR, 1908, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; Letter E. Poulton to Trades' Council, 15 October 1908, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹²² *NM*, 31 October 1902; For similar sentiments from a Labour supporter, see Hawker, *A Victorian poacher*, p. 78.

class, with life-long experience of its sufferings, its needs, and its aspirations'.¹²³ In January 1910, their leaflets claimed that the candidates had done much good work 'on behalf of the class' to which they belonged and would, if elected, support any measure that would 'benefit...our class'.¹²⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, labour and socialist activists carried this language of class with them into the NLRC on its formation in late 1914. Rather than seeking to appeal to all sections of the community, its founders made it clear that the new party would be above all be of value 'to the whole of the workers' and would initially focus its efforts on 'wean[ing] workers from allegiance to the Radical and Tory Parties'.¹²⁵

Terms such as 'the workers' remained the most frequently used social identifications in local labour discourse. As in Bristol, labour activists in Northampton also continued to provide broader terms with more restrictive meanings. The interchanging of narrow and broad terms appears consistently in the annual reports of the trades' council. For example, W. H. Reynolds, the author of the 1901 report, blamed the Boer War for postponing the much needed 'reforms for the *people* of these islands', but told 'the *workers*' to 'bestir themselves' to remedy this.¹²⁶ In the 1902 report, Reynolds criticised 'the workers' for not using their influence to improve 'the everyday life of the *masses of the people*'.¹²⁷ Frederick Roberts continued this tradition after his appointment as trades' council secretary in 1910. In his reports, Roberts also described the 'great mass of workers' as 'the toilers', 'the industrial community', the 'democracy', and 'the people'.¹²⁸ In one particularly pertinent example from 1914, Roberts noted that there was a 'growing solidarity in the ranks of *the toilers* which cannot be ignored'. 'The future', he concluded, 'will witness many transformations in the conditions of the life of *the people*'.¹²⁹

Despite the sectarian tone of this rhetoric, labour activists still refused to embrace an adversarial view of class relations. This is not to say that labour activists disapproved of confronting employers when necessary. For instance, Daniel Stanton and his fellow Lib-Lab trade unionists provided both moral and financial support to workers on strike after 1910.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, even during this period of labour

¹²³ Election leaflet for James Gribble and John E. Williams, NCL 198-781/10/1906; 'What Prominent men in the Labour Movement say about Williams', NCL 198-781/10/1906.

¹²⁴ Election leaflet for James Gribble and H. Quelch, NCL 198-781/10/1910.

¹²⁵ NTC AR, 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; NTC M, 7 January 1914; 22 April 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹²⁶ NTC AR, 1901, MRC MSS.524/4/1/25: Emphasis added.

¹²⁷ NTC AR, 1902, MRC MSS.524/4/1/25: Emphasis added.

¹²⁸ NTC AR, 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC AR, 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹²⁹ NTC AR, 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹³⁰ NUBSO MR, February 1913, MRC 547/P/1/29; NTC M, 26 June 1912, 1977/44/NTC2.

unrest, activists still tended to direct their hostility towards individual employers, not to employers as a class, who refused to acknowledge the just rights of the workers. As Stanton explained in 1911, 'a trade union...did not necessarily mean hostility to the employer'.¹³¹ In fact, he considered strikes to be harmful for both employers and employees.¹³² As he clarified at a meeting of trade unionists two years later, working men did not begrudge employers 'the fruits of success'. Instead, he claimed that they only sought to challenge those employers who had used 'tyrannical driving tactics' and those who had not 'behaved well'.¹³³ For Stanton at least, open class conflict in the form of strikes was an outcome of the actions of 'unjust' employers, not of the underlying antagonistic nature of the social order.

Stanton was not alone in maintaining a firm belief in class conciliation. Edward Poulton, the Northamptonian who rose to become the General Secretary of the NUBSO during this period, received applause at a meeting in his home town for declaring his desire to 'bring about peace ... between employers and employed'.¹³⁴ At a meeting of boot and shoe workers in 1911, Poulton reiterated that while his union did not hold any animosity towards employers as a class, it would always work to ensure that its members were not 'ground down' by individual employers.¹³⁵ Frederick Roberts, a member of the Typographical Association and the ILP, also acknowledged the existence of a 'better class of employer', and accepted that 'all sections of the community' had 'the right to combine to protect their interests'.¹³⁶ This view of class relations even infected the local trade union branches formed during the pre-war industrial unrest. The secretary of a newly established branch of the Operative Bakers' Union, for example, denied that his organisation was opposed to the employers. Its members, he argued, simply wanted their rights.¹³⁷

In 1914, Poulton claimed that trade unionists were 'out for right, and not for spite'.¹³⁸ This conciliatory view of class relations survived the Edwardian period in Northampton despite the changing nature of its industrial landscape. In addition to the emergence of new flourmills, breweries, and iron foundries, the town's dominant boot and shoe trade continued on its path to becoming a fully mechanised

¹³¹ NTC M, 16 October 1911; 21 August 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹³² *NM*, 4 April 1902.

¹³³ NTC M, 16 October 1911, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NUBSO MR, February 1913, MRC 547/P/1/29.

¹³⁴ NUBSO MR, November 1908, MRC 547/P/1/24.

¹³⁵ NUBSO MR, May 1911, MRC 547/P/1/27.

¹³⁶ NTC M, 15 November 1911, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC AR, 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹³⁷ NTC M, 21 February 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹³⁸ NUBSO CR, 1914, MRC 547/P/1/30.

industry.¹³⁹ However, the class identity of local labour activists did not undergo a similar process of transformation. Even as they displayed a greater level of concern with other categories of worker, male labour activists continued to perceive the working class in highly qualified and restrictive terms. For example, despite the large presence of women in the local workforce, male labour leaders continued to marginalise female workers in a number of ways.¹⁴⁰ This is not to suggest that they neglected the demands of the female labour force entirely. In the immediate pre-war years, the local branch of the NUBSO organised over three thousand female shoemakers in the town, who proceeded to send 'lady delegates' to the trades' council for the first time.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, male delegates on the trades' council repeatedly offered their sympathy and moral support for the principle of universal female suffrage.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, they also continued to draw a clear distinction between male and female workers and tended to prioritise the concerns of the former over the latter. The relatively late decision to organise female workers in the town, for example, was due to the prevailing idea that any attempt to do so would be futile because women had an inherent hostility to trade unionism.¹⁴³ The perception that women workers presented a threat to the wage and the status of the male worker also remained prevalent during this period. 'I know, as you do', complained William Hornidge of the NUBSO, 'that in nearly every instance, where females are introduced into an industry, it has followed that they have ousted the men'.¹⁴⁴ Edward Poulton offered a similar argument in 1907, suggesting that married female labour was partly responsible for (presumably male) unemployment. As a solution to this 'serious matter', Poulton advised working men to 'bring about a reversal of the condition of things in many homes where the woman, instead of the man, goes out to do the work'.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ Griffin, 'The Northampton Boot and Shoe Industry', p. 162:

¹⁴⁰ Griffin, 'The Northampton Boot and Shoe Industry', pp. 116; 163; A. L. Bowley, *Livelihood and poverty: a study in the economic conditions of working-class households in Northampton, Warrington, Stanley and Reading* (London, 1915), p. 49. In 1911, forty-two percent of male, and forty-three percent of female, occupied persons in Northampton were engaged in boot and allied trades. For a wider discussion of the NUBSO and its attitude towards its women members, see Boston, *Women Workers*, pp. 76-77.

¹⁴¹ NUBSO MR, December 1912, MRC 547/P/1/28; NM, 5 June 1914; NTC M, 15 January 1913, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC AR, 1913, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹⁴² NM, 27 August 1902; NTC AR, 1903, MRC MSS.524/4/1/29; NTC M, 20 August 1910, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC M, 20 August 1913, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹⁴³ NTC M, 21 September 1904, NRO 1977/44/NTC1.

¹⁴⁴ NUBSO CR, 1904, MRC 547/P/1/20.

¹⁴⁵ NUBSO MR, July 1907, MRC 547/P/1/23.

Labour leaders such as Poulton reinforced the distinctions between male and female workers by using gendered terms and expressions. Terms such as 'workmen' and 'the men' remained common alternative descriptions for trade unionists in this period.¹⁴⁶ Even the local SDF branch, which took the lead in organising social and educational meetings for women, used gendered language in its literature.¹⁴⁷ While women could vote in municipal elections at this time, the SDF directed its electoral appeals to the 'Men of Northampton'.¹⁴⁸ The place of male voters, as one leaflet argued, was on the 'political barricades' from where they could 'carry the Red Flag of Socialist freedom'. There was presumably no room for the women voters on the barricades. The same leaflet spoke to the 'Women of Northampton' as wives who should remember that capitalism had plunged them into 'untold domestic miseries' that 'un-sex[ed]' them. Instead of encouraging them to engage in the political and industrial field on an equal basis with men, the leaflet urged women to use their 'gentle influences to nerve and stimulate' their husbands in '*their* fight' against '*your* bitter class enemies'.¹⁴⁹

There was also little change in the way labour activists spoke of the unemployed. Again, as in the late Victorian period, they offered their sympathy and support to those workers who, through no fault of their own, had been cast out of employment.¹⁵⁰ At the same time, they remained keen to distinguish between those who were deserving of trade unionists' support, or the 'bona fide unemployed' as Edward Poulton called them, and those who were not.¹⁵¹ For example, in 1905, the trades' council criticised the Town Council's Distress Committee for hiring 'tramps' to paint the workhouse instead of authentic painters who were out of work.¹⁵² There was similar ambiguity in activists' language towards foreign workers, particularly during their discussions on the questions of the Boer War and 'Chinese Slavery' in

¹⁴⁶ NTC AR, 1906, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1910, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC M, 25 May 1910; 16 November 1910; 21 February 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; Leaflet attached to NTC M, 16 April 1913, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC M, 30 July 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹⁴⁷ Buckell, 'The Early Socialists in Northampton', p. 18.

¹⁴⁸ Women could vote in local elections from 1869. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁹ 'Socialist Call to Arms!' leaflet, NCL 198-781/10/1904: Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁰ NTC AR, 1902, MRC MSS.524/4/1/25; NTC AR, 1904, MRC MSS.524/4/1/32; NUBSO MR, April 1902, MRC 547/P/1/18; NTC AR, 1905, MRC MSS.524/4/1/35; NTC M, 6 March 1908, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; *NM*, 14 March 1901; 18 October 1901; 20 December 1901; 22 November 1901.

¹⁵¹ NUBSO CR, 1904, MRC 547/P/1/20.

¹⁵² NTC M, 18 January 1905, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; *NM*, 20 January 1905.

South Africa.¹⁵³ Although they claimed to oppose the introduction of indentured Chinese labour on moral grounds, the issue served to draw out activists' assumptions about race and nationality.¹⁵⁴ Speaking at a largely attended meeting on the subject in 1904, Daniel Stanton advocated improved treatment for Chinese labourers, but admitted that he essentially 'stood for the white man'. Indeed, his primary criticism of the government's actions on this question was for falsely claiming to give 'civil rights to the white man in the Transvaal'.¹⁵⁵

The survival of these restrictive attitudes demonstrates strong continuities with pre-1900 conceptions of the working class. In the years immediately prior to the First World War, however, there was a discernible shift in the way labour activists in Northampton spoke of agricultural labourers. This attitudinal change was largely the result of the campaigns of the National Agricultural Labourers' and Rural Workers' Union (NALRWU) in rural Northamptonshire.¹⁵⁶ Frederick Roberts of the trades' council assisted the union in their early activities, but it was a dispute between a Liberal landowner and labourers on his estate in 1914 that galvanised the movement even further. From the outset, Northampton's leading trade unionists portrayed the dispute as a conventional strike between an employer and his workers. In their speeches and resolutions on the topic, and in marked contrast to their predecessors, they downplayed the exceptional conditions of the rural worker and, instead, depicted them as equal partners in the industrial struggle for the rights of labour. Roberts argued that the 'most important point' of the dispute was the 'right of combination for *all sections of workers*'. The landlord's actions, he continued, represented a direct challenge to 'the *industrial* movement'. Another trades' council delegate considered agricultural labourers to be 'the bottom dogs in *industry*', a statement that was both condescending and somewhat inclusive in tone.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, a banner held aloft at a protest meeting in one rural village, which declared that the labourers were 'Fighting for Freedom, Liberty and Justice', and

¹⁵³ As Preben Kaarsholm has noted, a number of liberal and socialist opponents of the Boer War still 'incorporated and mirrored basic imperialist ideological assumptions'. P. Kaarsholm, 'Pro-Boers' in R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Volume I: History and Politics* (London, 1989), p. 120. For more on labour attitudes to Chinese slavery, see May, 'The Chinese in Britain', pp. 111-124; Auerbach, *Race, Law, and "The Chinese Puzzle"*, pp. 28-50.

¹⁵⁴ *NM*, 21 September 1900; NTC AR, 1904, NRO 1977/44/NTC1. Paul Ward has argued that even those on the left who opposed the Boer War did so from a position of 'radical patriotism' by using an 'oppositional notion of Englishness'. Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 59; 75.

¹⁵⁵ *NM*, 8 April 1904.

¹⁵⁶ NTC M, 11 February 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC M, 2 November 1913; 19 November 1913; 30 November 1913; 17 December 1913, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹⁵⁷ NTC M, 22 April 1914; 24 June 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3: Emphases added.

which urged workers to join their unions, would not have looked out of place at a trade union meeting in an urban area.¹⁵⁸ For labour activists in Northampton, agricultural labourers, but not women, the undeserving unemployed and foreign workers, were now members of the broadly conceived working class.

The themes of rights and liberty formed a central part of the NALWURU's message in rural Northamptonshire. They also remained core concepts at the heart of labourist ideology. In contrast to Bristol, where labourism found its organisational expression in the BLRC, proponents of the ideology in Northampton were scattered, at least until 1914, amongst a variety of progressive organisations. Still, the ideological evolution of labourism in both areas largely followed the same pattern during this period. Firstly, as in the late nineteenth century, labourism's core was composed of the concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty. Thus, regardless of their political affiliation, labour activists advocated lawful democratic reform, increased labour representation, and the defence and extension of political and industrial rights. Secondly, labourism continued to become more collectivist in tone. By the outbreak of war in August 1914, labour activists in Northampton had begun to advocate proposals, such as an expansive programme of collective ownership, which would have seemed impractical to them just decades earlier. As in Bristol, though, this represented an evolution within labourism, not a conversion of labour activists to socialism. Rather than seeing state intervention as a step towards the replacement of capitalism, labour activists still believed that it was a more effective, and proven, method of attaining the goals that they and their political predecessors had long fought for.

Not all of these goals demanded the action of an interventionist state. Old democratic proposals, which had featured prominently in nineteenth-century radical programmes, remained a central part of the labourist agenda.¹⁵⁹ To some extent, this was also true of the local branch of the SDF. During the general election campaign of January 1910, which primarily revolved around the question of the budget and the House of Lords, one SDF leaflet claimed that the party was composed of 'Socialists and Democrats' who stood for 'the completest form of democracy: Government of

¹⁵⁸ *NM*, 19 June 1914.

¹⁵⁹ NTC M, 31 May 1900; 16 January 1907, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC1: Trades' council programmes included measures relating to the House of Lords, adult suffrage, triennial parliaments, and the second ballot.

the People by the People for the People'.¹⁶⁰ At the same election, one of the party's candidates portrayed his party as the true heir of Northampton's long democratic tradition, stating that Charles Bradlaugh would be 'working on the side of the Socialists' if he were alive in 1910.¹⁶¹ This democratic ethos was also apparent in the way labour and socialist activists justified their support for their principal objective, labour representation. When they discussed this principle, they continued to speak almost exclusively of the benefits it would bring, not to the community as a whole, but to the workers. Again, the electoral appeals of the SDF had an equally strong class inflection. The party's literature urged trade unionists to use their political power to 'improve *our* economic position, and *our* social status'. Moreover, it claimed that the party was 'in favour of the most democratic programme' so as to establish 'the fullest political power for *our* class'.¹⁶²

A strong constitutionalist ethos also continued to shape the discourse and the demands of local labour activists. In general, they continued to believe that the election of labour representatives, by making political institutions more representative of all sections of the community, would help to realise the representative principles of the constitution.¹⁶³ Their sense of reverence for the constitution and for Parliament remained intact despite the industrial turbulence of the pre-war era. Indeed, it was the unconstitutional actions of the authorities that angered labour activists most during the labour unrest. For example, when the Home Office called for the enrolment of civilian police in 1911, protests by trades' council delegates focused primarily on the illegality of the demand.¹⁶⁴ Daniel Stanton was particularly scathing about the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, whom he compared to the Tsar of Russia for enacting laws without passing them through the House of Commons. During this period, Stanton's criticisms of employers and the Liberal government rested almost entirely on the unconstitutional nature of their actions. After 1910, he claimed that both employers and government officials had gone 'outside the law and any Constitution in order to crush at any cost, and with any weapon, the aspirations of the workers'.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Election leaflet for James Gribble and H. Quelch, NCL 198-781/10/1910; Taylor, *Lords of Misrule*, pp. 123-125.

¹⁶¹ *Ni*, 5 January 1910.

¹⁶² Election leaflet for James Gribble and John E. Williams, NCL 198-781/10/1906.

¹⁶³ NTC AR, 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2. Even SDF activists favoured a 'peaceful revolution'. See Buckell, 'The Early Socialists in Northampton', pp. 22-24; 'Socialist Call to Arms!' leaflet, NCL 198-781/10/1904.

¹⁶⁴ NTC M, 20 September 1911; 15 November 1911; 20 March 1912, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹⁶⁵ NTC M, 21 January 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

For Stanton and other labour activists in Northampton, workers engaged in political and industrial activity to defend the rights and liberties of labour, trade unionists, and the working class. In their speeches, they continued to portray violations of these rights as 'unjust' or 'tyrannical' and contrary to the principle of 'fair play'.¹⁶⁶ For instance, they understood the 'Uprising of the Agricultural Labourers' in 1914 as a revolt against 'tyranny', through which the labourers were fighting for 'their right to justice and freedom'.¹⁶⁷ They also condemned the government's partisanship during the industrial unrest and its threat to call out troops as a danger to the 'rights and privileges of the workers'.¹⁶⁸ This concept, which had shaped both radical and nineteenth-century labourist ideology, remained so important for labour activists that, in 1907, they enshrined it in the trades' council's rulebook. This organisation, the new rulebook stated, was 'established for attainment by the Workers of their social and political rights'. Its delegates must always 'use their judgement "For the Right," and whenever or wherever they find the workers are defrauded of their right, it shall be the duty of all representatives' to 'undauntedly ... gain them'.¹⁶⁹

In Northampton, the core concepts of working-class radicalism thus remained key components in labourist ideology. Throughout this period, the peripheral concept of the state continued to grow in importance within labourism's ideological morphology. This found its programmatic expression in activists' advocacy of statist proposals, such as old aged pensions, the nationalisation of selected industries, and a non-contributory system of national insurance.¹⁷⁰ Again, though, this support for a wider range of statist solutions did not represent the conversion of formerly moderate labour activists to socialist ideology. In fact, the contrasts between labourism and socialism in Northampton were apparent in the way local activists justified their statist demands. Essentially, labour activists

¹⁶⁶ See NTC M, 25 July 1900, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; Leaflet 'Opera House Band Dispute', 20 January 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NTC AR, 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; Leaflet 'Corby Strike', 16 August 1911, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹⁶⁷ *NM*, 17 April 1914; 29 May 1914; NTC AR, 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹⁶⁸ NTC M, 15 November 1911, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

¹⁶⁹ NTC Rulebook, 1907, NRO 1977/44/NTC3. For more examples, see NTC AR, 1908, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; Letter E. Poulton to Trades' Council, 15 October 1908, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC AR, 1909, NRO 1977/44/NTC1. NUBSO CR, 1914, MRC 547/P/1/30.

¹⁷⁰ NTC M, 27 June 1900, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NUBSO MR, December 1900, MRC 547/P/1/16; NTC AR, 1904; 1906, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC M, 20 February 1907, NRO 1977/44/NTC1; NTC M, 25 May 1910; 25 July 1911; 16 October 1911, NRO 1977/44/NTC2; NUBSO MR, January 1912, MRC 547/P/1/28.

favoured these policies for entirely practical reasons.¹⁷¹ Discussions among activists at the NUBSO's biennial conferences neatly demonstrate these contrasting perspectives. At the 1902 conference, William Hornidge argued that while 'he was a collectivist', he disagreed with the socialist 'quest for visionary reforms' because he wanted 'something in his lifetime'. James Gribble, a prominent socialist in Northampton at this time, contended that there was an important difference between socialism and nationalisation, which persuaded Edward Poulton to join the debate and to declare that this was a 'misconception' of socialism. The Post Office, Poulton argued, was a perfect example of socialism, to which Gribble replied that it was 'nothing of the kind'. Despite Gribble's protestation, Poulton insisted that he too was a socialist.¹⁷²

As Michael Freedon has noted, the blurring of distinctions between collectivism and socialism was common at this time.¹⁷³ The growing acceptance among labour activists of the practicality and value of statist proposals certainly represented a shift in popular attitudes to the state. However, activists such as Hornidge and Poulton were merely articulating their long-held ideology of labourism, which, though increasingly collectivist in accent, continued to differ from socialism in its underlying conceptual framework. Advocates of labourism favoured collectivist proposals for practical reasons, and offered entirely pragmatic justifications for supporting them. Thus, Sam Adams of the NUBSO supported Old Aged Pensions because boot and shoe manufacturers had begun to discharge older men from employment. Daniel Stanton approved of state action on pensions because friendly societies and trade unions had previously tried and failed to provide them themselves.¹⁷⁴ T. W. Lewis, also of the NUBSO, favoured government action on unemployment because voluntary organisations 'could do no more' without its help.¹⁷⁵ The shift towards collectivism among labour activists was thus borne out of an increasing realisation that the state could play an effective role in furthering the long-standing principles of labourism and its ideological ancestor, working-class radicalism.

¹⁷¹ They also rejected certain types of state intervention, such as compulsory vaccination. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society*, p. 1; *NM*, 20 May 1898.

¹⁷² NUBSO CR, 1902, MRC 547/P/1/18; NUBSO CR, 1904, MRC 547/P/1/20.

¹⁷³ Freedon, *The New Liberalism*, p. 32.

¹⁷⁴ NUBSO CR, 1900, MRC 547/P/1/16.

¹⁷⁵ NTC M, 16 March 1910, NRO 1977/44/NTC2.

5.3 Summary

This chapter has suggested that the LRCs formed in Bristol and Northampton in the Edwardian period should be considered part of a distinctive political and ideological tradition dating back to the late 1860s. In particular, it has demonstrated that while important organisational, programmatic, and generational changes took place within Edwardian labour politics, labour activists in these two constituencies remained firmly wedded to old ways of thinking. Firstly, even as they established new organisations, they often retained a belief in old political strategies. In Bristol, labour activists adopted the independent strategy of its precursors who, in the 1870s, had formed trade unionist-dominated organisations to challenge the conservatism and moderation of the local Liberal party. While labour activists in Northampton formally broke with the Liberal party and their old conciliatory strategy in 1914, they did so only cautiously and on the condition that the broad progressive alliance in the town would remain intact. The formation of the Northampton LRC, though certainly novel in an organisational sense, did not represent a fundamental transformation in labour activists' attitudes towards the local Liberal party.

Secondly, labour activists held on to their old conceptions of class and the social order. Throughout this period, and contrary to the liberal revisionist interpretation, they continued to exhibit a strong and exclusivist sense of class in their political and industrial appeals. At the same time, and in contrast to traditionalist accounts of this period, they also rejected the politics of class conflict, which they deemed to be neither desirable nor beneficial. In Bristol and Northampton, this non-adversarial conception of class survived the years of industrial unrest immediately prior to the First World War. During this period, trade unionists still tended to condemn individual employers and government ministers rather than the employing class as a whole. Furthermore, despite the important industrial changes taking place in Bristol and Northampton at this time, labour activists refused to abandon their old perceptions of the working class. More specifically, they continued to prioritise the concerns of the urban and regularly employed British working man, even when they showed a greater interest in the travails of other workers. Although there were some important attitudinal shifts towards 'other' workers, especially among activists in Northampton, continuity was, in this respect, more prevalent than change. As previous chapters demonstrated, a conciliatory view of class and class relations, as well as highly exclusivist class

identity, had defined both working-class radical and labour politics in these constituencies since the late 1860s.

Finally, there were significant ideological continuities between working-class radicalism and Edwardian labourism. As in the period before 1900, labour activists in Bristol and Northampton placed a strong emphasis on the concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty. Moreover, when they articulated these concepts verbally or in writing, they tended to give them a marked class accent. They continued to associate democracy with the expansion of the franchise and, more particularly, with direct labour representation, which remained their primary objective throughout this period. They remained committed to gradual and constitutional methods of reform, even as the pre-war industrial unrest gave rise to extra-parliamentary strategies such as syndicalism. They continued to favour collectivist proposals, such as old aged pensions, as a way to defend and strengthen the rights and liberties of the working class. Even as the content of their political programmes changed, the conceptual framework of their ideology did not. In this sense, as well as in their political strategies and their conceptions of class relations, Edwardian labour activists in Bristol and Northampton demonstrated a strong commitment to the old political tradition of working-class radicalism.

6: 'A Poor Man's War', 1914-1918¹

Previous historians of the Labour party and of popular politics in general have seen the First World War, and its related political, industrial, and ideological consequences, as crucial for explaining the post-war realignment of British politics. On this question at least, the traditionalist/revisionist typology used so far throughout this thesis becomes superfluous.² Although the examples of Bristol and Northampton strengthen this prevalent view of the war and its political and industrial impact on wider British *society*, they suggest that the war did not significantly transform the political appeals, conceptions of class, or dominant ideological perspectives of local labour *activists*. On some questions, the war did lead to a shift in activists' attitudes. For example, a number of interrelated developments during the war convinced those in Northampton to abandon their long-held conciliatory strategy towards the Liberal party.³ In both constituencies, there was also a slight yet discernible increase of antagonistic statements in their political discourse. Yet, in general, labour activists in Bristol and Northampton remained committed to the guiding principles, outlooks, and ideas that had defined both working-class radical and labour politics in these constituencies since the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Continuity between pre-war and wartime labour politics was evident in labour activists' conceptions of class and the social order. As in other urban centres, there were considerable industrial changes in Bristol and Northampton throughout the war. Furthermore, as Patrick Joyce has argued, the war seemed to mark a turning point during which an adversarial view of class relations became more widespread

¹ Will Crooks, Labour MP for Woolwich, speaking at a meeting in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire. *NM*, 16 October 1914.

² Scholars who have offered class-based explanations of early twentieth century popular politics have seen a number of wartime developments as creating favourable conditions for the Labour party. See Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, pp. 394-395; Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, pp. 180-181; Kirk, *Change, continuity and class*, p. 198. See also G. D. H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914* (London, 1948), p. 54. The view that the war had significant transformative impact on popular politics has also informed studies by liberal revisionist scholars. See Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 8; Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, pp. 16-17. More recent studies have not fundamentally challenged this view. See D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo, 'Introduction' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 2; Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, pp. 7-8; Pugh, *Speak For Britain!*, p. 100; Todd, *The People*, p. 30. There are exceptions. For examples, see McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. 105; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, pp. 351-353.

³ McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, pp. 122-123; Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour', p. 174.

among British workers.⁴ In Bristol and Northampton, however, the majority of labour activists refused to abandon their pre-war and conciliatory view of class relations. Thus, as before the war, and notwithstanding a few exceptions, they consistently prioritised the demands of the working class whilst, at the same, distancing themselves from the politics of class struggle. Wartime economic developments, including the greater involvement of women in formerly male-dominated industries, also had little impact on changing male activists' perception of the working class.⁵ In these constituencies, male labour activists continued to articulate a highly restrictive class identity that marginalised, both implicitly and explicitly, other categories of worker. Indeed, far from transforming their attitudes to, say, women and foreign workers, the war merely served to draw out many of the assumptions that had historically underpinned them.⁶

The survival of this conception of class and class relations questions the extent to which the war had a transformative impact on the perspectives of local labour activists. The existence of substantial ideological continuities between pre-war and wartime labourism also challenges this view. While certain wartime developments altered the programmatic demands of labour activists, it did not substantially modify the conceptual framework of their pre-existing ideology. Indeed, it was their commitment to the core concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty that shaped their responses to the new problems generated by the conflict. For example, their demand for labour representation on local wartime committees, such as Military Tribunals, emanated from their understanding of democracy and, more particularly, from their class-based analysis of political representation.⁷ Their disavowal of extra-parliamentary strategies, especially in light of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, was based upon their continued reverence for, as

⁴ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 8. See also Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 131-133.

⁵ Due to the shortage of male labour, women and girls began to enter industry in unprecedented numbers. The Board of Trade estimates suggest that the total increase of women in industry during the war was 1,650,000. Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, pp. 68-69; Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 108; A. Marwick, *Women at War, 1914-1918* (Glasgow, 1977), p. 166; A. Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (London, 1994), p. 17. Gail Braybon suggests that 'distrust, disparagement and ... amused contempt' was the 'most common' reaction amongst male workers to newly-employed women. G. Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London, 1981), pp. 68; 72. See also Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 121; C. A. Culleton, *Working-Class Culture, Women, and Britain, 1914-1921* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 52-53; Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, pp. 201-203; Hunt, 'Dancing and Days Out', p. 114.

⁶ Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 121-126; Pugh, *Speak For Britain!*, p. 12.

⁷ For details of these tribunals, see A. Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London, 1965), p. 77; Pugh, *Speak For Britain!*, p. 108.

well as their democratic reading of, the English constitution.⁸ Furthermore, their hostility and opposition to certain pieces of wartime legislation, such as the Defence of the Realm Act and conscription, derived from the notion that the constitution granted to all classes certain political and industrial rights.⁹ While labourist demands became even more collectivist throughout the war, this merely represented the continuation of labourism's ideological evolution.¹⁰ Labourism, after all, had exhibited marked collectivist tendencies long before 1914. Moreover, for labour activists, the increase in state control of the wartime economy confirmed the validity of their pre-existing ideology.¹¹ While the programmatic expression of labourism continued to undergo change during the war, its underlying conceptual architecture did not.

Of course, emphasising the theme of continuity raises the question of how the Labour parties in Bristol and Northampton, despite not experiencing any significant ideological shift during the war, managed to replace the Liberals as the main progressive force in the post-war era. While the post-war period falls outside the scope of this study, it seems certain that, by the end of the war, the political context in these constituencies, if not labour politics, had markedly changed. At the 1918 general election, labour activists used a political language and put forward a range of demands that differed very little from that of, say, 1910. Yet internal divisions within the local Liberal parties, the positive demonstration of the power of statist policies during the war years, and the growth of Labour-party affiliated trade unions all helped to provide a fruitful context in which local Labour parties could grow.¹² In Bristol and Northampton, labour activists were now able to present their parties as the most effective, independent and progressive reformist organisations without having to alter their political language or their electoral appeals. As a consequence, and building upon their reasonable performance in the peculiar conditions of 1918, the Labour parties slowly began to challenge the Liberals at

⁸ Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 155-156; B. Jones, *The Russia Complex: The British Labour Party and the Soviet Union* (Manchester, 1977), p. 4.

⁹ For trade unionist responses to these measures, see Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 2*, pp. 153-154; Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion*, p. 46.

¹⁰ McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, pp. 102-106.

¹¹ For Cronin, 'the war had caused a growth in state power that was both fascinating and frightening'. Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion*, p. 45. See also Marwick, *The Deluge*, pp. 151-188; 292; Thane, 'Labour and welfare', pp. 88-89; J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement 1867-1974* (Brighton, 1983), p. 96; P. Dewey, *War and Progress: Britain 1914-1945* (Harlow, 1997), p. 28.

¹² Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, p. 7. For the impact of war on the trade union movement, see Marwick, *The Deluge*, pp. 56-58; Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 177-185.

parliamentary and municipal levels to such an extent that, by the end of the 1920s, Bristol and Northampton could no longer be considered strongholds of the Liberal party.¹³

6.1 Bristol

In Bristol, the political and industrial developments of the war years served to reaffirm labour activists' faith in independent political action. Before 1914, the Bristol LRC had fully embraced the political strategy of their radical and labour ancestors and had challenged both Liberals and Conservatives at a municipal and parliamentary level. The war years did little to convince labour activists to alter this strategy. In fact, after the reorganisation of their party in mid-1918, they resolved to stand more parliamentary candidates than ever before at that year's general election.¹⁴ Moreover, the Bristol Labour party put forward an unprecedented number of candidates at the 1919 municipal elections in opposition to ten Liberal and five Conservative challengers.¹⁵

By the end of the war, labour activists had begun to see independent political action as more necessary than ever. Firstly, as they frequently pointed out during their election campaigns, they did so because they perceived there to be an ever-growing union of Conservative and Liberal forces at a local and national level. As the Labour party candidate for Bristol East, Luke Bateman, told a group of voters in 1918, the political landscape had become divided between 'the Coalition and Labour'. The 'forces of Labour' had been 'welded into one great party', which now stood in opposition to the combined 'spirit of old Liberalism and Toryism'. At the same election, Ernest Bevin, who stood for Labour in Bristol Central, interpreted the contest as a declaration of war upon the Labour party by the 'two-headed caucus' that represented 'the capitalist class'.¹⁶ For activists like Bevin, the growing unity

¹³ For the peculiar conditions of the election, see J. Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War', *Past and Present*, 190/1 (2006), p. 195. In 1929, Labour held four (out of five) of Bristol's parliamentary seats. In the same year, the political composition of the City Council was 38 Labour councillors and aldermen, 1 Liberal, 4 Conservatives, and 49 Citizen Party (an anti-Labour front formed by Liberals and Conservatives, but dominated by the latter). Charles McCurdy's victory as a 'National Liberal' in 1922 was the last time Northampton elected a Liberal parliamentary candidate, and the last time (as of 2015) that the party polled more than Labour at a general election in that constituency. They remained stronger at a municipal level, having 14 representatives on the Town Council in 1930 to the Conservatives' 21 and Labour's 13. T. Sinnett, 'The Development of the Labour Party in Bristol, 1918-1931' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of the West of England, 2006), p. 260; *NM*, 7 November 1930.

¹⁴ See Appendix.

¹⁵ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 17; *WDP*, 3 November 1919.

¹⁶ *WDP*, 21 November 1918; 2 December 1918; 4 December 1918.

between the Liberals and the Conservatives, both locally and nationally, confirmed the validity of their long-held political strategy.

Secondly, a newfound sense of confidence in an independent strategy was due to the Bristol Labour party's wartime growth.¹⁷ The considerable increase in trade union membership between 1914 and 1918 strengthened the party's finances and helped to broaden its base. Trade union expansion was particularly marked in the local Dockers' Union, which, by 1918, had as many members as all the unions of pre-war Bristol combined.¹⁸ The co-option of leading party members onto various wartime committees also gave the Labour party an influence that it had failed to achieve in peacetime.¹⁹ This enhanced standing even led to the elevation of one of its leaders, Frank Sheppard, to the position of Lord Mayor in 1917.²⁰ Finally, labour activists believed that internal disagreements within the Liberal party presented them with an unprecedented electoral opportunity. In contrast to the divided Liberals, Labour could now present itself as the only unified progressive force in Bristol, especially in the predominantly working-class and historically Liberal stronghold of Bristol East.²¹ Indeed, at the 1918 general election, arguments within the local Liberal Association over the party's role in the Coalition government led to the selection of two rival Liberal candidates, which almost certainly contributed to the Labour party's increased share of the vote.²²

The wartime growth of the Labour party and its affiliated organisations, coupled with the apparent ease with which the Liberals now worked with the Conservatives, convinced labour activists of the enduring relevance of old strategies. To some extent, the vitality of the local labour movement obscured the divisions that had emerged within the Bristol LRC over the war itself. Despite notable exceptions, leaders of the Bristol ILP branch vehemently opposed the conflict.²³ Under the leadership of Walter Ayles, a devoutly religious City Councillor, ILP members distributed pacifist literature and held open-air meetings that often met with apathy

¹⁷ Clinton, *Trade Union Rank and File*, p. 64; Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, pp. 16-17; Miscellaneous press cuttings, BRO 32080/TC10/24(a); *WDP*, 8 May 1916.

¹⁸ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 15; Whitfield, 'Trade Unionism in Bristol', pp. 81-83; Kelly and Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement', p. 218. In 1917, the secretary of the local Dockers' Union claimed membership had increased from 1,000 in 1910 to over 20,000 by 1917. *WDP*, 24 December 1917.

¹⁹ *WDP*, 12 February 1916; 16 February 1916; 6 May 1916.

²⁰ *BG*, 17 November 1917.

²¹ Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, p. 145.

²² Labour polled 2,255 (17.2%) in January 1910 and 8,135 (42.8%) in 1918. NUBSO MR, January 1910, MRC 547/P/1/26; *WDP*, 13 December 1918; 30 December 1918.

²³ Bryher, *Labour and Socialist: Part 3*, p. 7; General Secretary's MR, 1 November 1914, BRO 32080/TC10/24(a).

or, on some occasions, physical violence.²⁴ As a result of their opposition to the war, the ILP's branch membership decreased, its financial contributions declined, and a number of its leaders served time in prison.²⁵ Yet, while the ILP obtained a strong presence on the leadership body of the LRC, its stance on the war was not representative of the Labour party at large. Most of Bristol's prominent trade union leaders fervently supported the war effort, as did leading members of the BSS.²⁶ Even A. A. Senington, a leading member of the ILP, broke ranks with his party, claiming that he would be a coward if he sided with Ayles and his former colleagues.²⁷ By sidelining Ayles and other pacifist figures during the 1918 election campaign, the dominant pro-war faction in the Labour party was able to present the party as the only united, powerful, and independent progressive force in Bristol.

By the time of the 1918 election, there had been a very slight shift towards a more antagonistic view of class relations within labour discourse.²⁸ Throughout the war, a small number of leading labour activists in the city began to use more adversarial language in their verbal and written appeals and gradually moved away from singling out individual employers for condemnation. It is important, however, not to overstate the prevalence of these views in local labour circles. As we have seen, since the late 1860s, trade unionists in Bristol had articulated a model of society that depicted classes as distinct but not mutually antagonistic sections of the community. In 1918, as in the pre-war period, the overwhelming majority of labour activists still combined this exclusivist emphasis on class distinctions with hostility to the idea of class conflict. In their political and industrial appeals, they continued to place a strong emphasis on the interests of the working class whilst directing their appeals exclusively to this section of the population. At the same time, the majority of activists distanced themselves from the more oppositional doctrines of their socialist allies. The survival of this conception of class through the war years suggests that wartime developments, despite having a significant attitudinal impact on the

²⁴ 'My higher duty to conscience, humanity and God', speech delivered by W. Ayles to Bristol Court, 13 November 1916, LSEILP ILP/5/1916/7; Miscellaneous press cuttings, BRO 32080/TC10/24(b); General Secretary's MR, 6 September 1915, BRO 32080/TC10/24(b); *BT&M*, 28 August 1915.

²⁵ Lynch, *A Tale of Three Cities*, p. 154; 'Defence before the court-martial', defence speech of W. Ayles, LSEILP ILP/5/1916/6.

²⁶ For examples of these pro-war sentiments, see *BO*, 27 March 1915; 29 May 1915; *BT&M*, 10 November 1915; *WDP*, 29 May 1916. Although he had doubts about the war, Bevin 'would have nothing to do with the I.L.P. and the pacifist minority within the Labour party'. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Volume One*, p. 48.

²⁷ *BT&M*, 10 November 1915, BRO 32080/TC10/24(a).

²⁸ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 8.

wider population, did not transform labour activists' views on class and class relations.

One element in this conception of class that remained consistent through the war years was a strong focus on the unique interests of the working class. The widely accepted idea that the war effort was a national concern, which required the co-operation of employers, workers, and all political parties, did not prevent labour activists from emphasising the unique traits, experiences, and sufferings of the working class. It was very common, for example, for activists to stress the class basis of the war effort. Trades' council delegates expressed their hope that the sacrifices demanded by the war would be 'borne equally by all classes', but complained that 'given the existing inequalities of society' it was inevitable that 'working folk would bear the brunt'.²⁹ The idea that the working class had sacrificed most during the war years became a central feature of Labour's election campaign in 1918. A leaflet for T. C. Lewis, Labour's candidate in Bristol South, described the losses incurred by 'the common people' in the war, whereas Ernest Bevin's literature claimed that ninety-five per cent of the men who had fought in the war belonged to the working classes.³⁰ The national Labour party's decision to open its doors to members of all classes, therefore, seemed to have no discernible impact on changing Bristol activists' class-centred approach to politics. Bevin certainly did not moderate his appeal, admitting during the election campaign that he desired to represent his class so that they could gain access to what 'the other class' had. Luke Bateman also spoke repeatedly about his class background and claimed to have been trained in the 'greatest university - the world, the workshop, in grime, and poverty'. Lewis, with his characteristic candour, explained that he was 'out to support his own class' and to 'represent the workers'.³¹

During the 1918 general election, Labour candidates also continued to use terms such as 'the people' and 'the workers' interchangeably. Bevin, for example, spoke of 'the great mass of the people' and 'his class' without distinction, while T. C. Lewis claimed to know 'the difficulties and trials of the masses' because he had spent his life as a 'working man'. Luke Bateman used similar language, and urged 'the working man and toiling woman' and the 'industrial classes' to vote Labour because the Coalition government did not represent the 'national interests of *the people*'.

²⁹ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 14.

³⁰ Election leaflet of T. C. Lewis, 1918, BRO 32080/TC6/2/1; Election leaflet of E. Bevin, 1918, BRO 44562/2.

³¹ *WDP*, 18 November 1918; 3 December 1918; 4 December 1918; 10 December 1918.

Again, at the election count in December 1918, Bateman promised his audience that Bristol would soon return men pledged to the 'interests of *democracy*' and that they would elect those who advocated the cause of 'the *labourer* and the *toiling people*'. For these candidates, 'the people' and 'democracy' were not definitions of a broad and trans-class social group, but an alternative way of describing the working class.

As before the war, this sectarian conception of class was not synonymous with an antagonistic view of social relations. Bateman, for instance, denied that he stood for 'class legislation' and promised to represent 'the *whole* of the people'.³² In the middle of the war, Walter Ayles also denied that the ILP wished to be 'unjust to the wealthy' and explained that his party sought 'industrial peace' and the reconciliation of 'conflicting interests'.³³ This is not to suggest that antagonistic language was entirely absent from labour rhetoric. Some, such as Ernest Bevin, began to speak of 'the capitalists' on a class basis, rather than as a group composed of fair and unjust employers. Speaking to a joint meeting of employers and trade unionists in 1917, Bevin admitted that working from the age of ten while his employer's son went to University had produced within him 'an intense hatred'.³⁴ He carried this hostility into his election campaign, during which he told a meeting of dockers that 'Labour was on one side and capitalists were on the other'. At another meeting, he expressed his belief that there was little chance of friendly relations existing between the two classes while 'labour had to hand [over] two-thirds of what they produced'. In fact, all of Labour's electoral candidates in 1918 used this type of language at some point in their campaigns. On one occasion, T. C. Lewis characterised the election in Bristol South as a straightforward contest between 'capital and labour'. James Kaylor, who contested the Bristol North seat, admitted that he had 'no message of hope' for those who earned more than £1,000.³⁵ By the end of 1918, oppositional sentiments had become more prevalent among labour activists in Bristol.

To some extent, this confirms Patrick Joyce's suspicion that the war years 'saw the growth of dichotomous images of society turning upon the opposition of labour and capital'.³⁶ Yet, it is important to stress that these views, despite growing in prevalence, did not entirely replace activists' pre-war conceptions of society. In

³² *WDP*, 28 November 1918; 2 December 1918; 4 December 1918; 30 December 1918: Emphases added.

³³ General Secretary's MR, 2 April 2015, BRO 32080/TC10/24(b).

³⁴ *WDP*, 13 January 1917; Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Volume One*, p. 69.

³⁵ *WDP*, 2 December 1918; 3 December 1918; 10 December 1918; 12 December 1918.

³⁶ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, p. 8. See also Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 131-133.

Bristol, conflictual 'images of society' were simply not widespread enough to suggest there had been a fundamental and decisive change in labour activists' worldview. Furthermore, the decision to emphasise antagonism or conciliation often depended on the audience. For example, at a meeting that included 'many professional and business men' in its audience, Bevin spoke of his record of helping commercial men and of preventing strikes. At another, he denied accusations that he 'sneered at the middle class', reminding his audience that Labour had 'thrown open its ranks in the widest sense'.³⁷ Similarly, another Labour supporter disavowed the antagonistic sentiments expressed by some of his colleagues and claimed that the Labour party sought 'to bring all classes together'.³⁸ In Bristol, the shift towards antagonistic images of society among labour activists was far from complete or universal.

Similarly, throughout the war, there were only slight changes in male labour activists' perception of the working class. As we have seen, labour activists had historically tended to exclude women, certain sections of the unemployed, agricultural labourers, and foreign workers from their definition of this class, even when they offered moral and active support to their respective struggles. Industrial developments during the war years forced labour activists to consider the lives and concerns of these workers to a greater extent than before the war. For example, the wartime demand for labour increased the possibilities of paid work for women, many of whom subsequently joined the city's existing trade unions.³⁹ However, while male labour activists largely accepted the employment of women workers in formerly male-dominated industries, on the condition that it was to be a temporary measure only, they continued to articulate a highly gendered notion of class. It was still more common for them to use terms such as 'working-men' and 'workmen' rather than the more inclusive term, 'working men and women'.⁴⁰ Furthermore, when male labour activists did speak directly to women, they continued to appeal to them primarily as wives and homemakers, rather than as fellow workers.⁴¹ As George Thompson of the Labour party told women workers at a meeting in 1918, 'go home

³⁷ *WDP*, 5 December 1918; 7 December 1918. Luke Bateman also claimed he did not want 'to raise class feeling': *WDP*, 9 December 1918.

³⁸ *WDP*, 6 December 1918. See also Frank Sheppard, the first Labour Lord Mayor of Bristol, speaking to the Broad Plain Sunday School. *WDP*, 2 October 1918.

³⁹ Malos, 'Bristol Women in Action', p. 125; Lynch, *A Tale of Three Cities*, p. 153; Whitfield, 'Trade Unionism in Bristol', p. 81.

⁴⁰ For examples, see speeches by Labour candidates in *WDP*, 4 December 1918; 10 December 1918; 12 December 1918.

⁴¹ Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, pp. 73-74.

and "have a row" with [your] menfolk, and tell them to down tools until queues were abolished'.⁴²

This tendency to draw a distinction between male and female workers pervaded Labour's election campaign in 1918. One of Ernest Bevin's election leaflets made a direct appeal to the newly enfranchised 'Women Electorate' and explained that much depended on women voters at the election.⁴³ The same leaflet, though, promised voters that the Labour party would increase the standard of life so that women, who had 'the duty of maternity', should not be forced 'owing to the low wages of husbands ... into the factory'. 'We do not believe', it stated, 'that the women want to work for the factory owner'.⁴⁴ While Bevin spoke directly to women voters at his election meetings, he tended to discuss their lives in the home rather than in the workplace and, at times, claimed that their continued employment resulted in 'keeping wages down'. T. C. Lewis adopted the same attitude during his campaign. While praising women for their work during the war, Lewis argued that male workers should 'see to it that their women folk were not pressed to continue at work as well as their husbands'.⁴⁵

Owing to the general lack of unemployment during the war years, it is more difficult to evaluate how activists' attitudes to the unemployed changed.⁴⁶ In Bristol, the demand for labour was so high that City Councillors agreed to disband the Distress Committee, which had previously provided work for the unemployed.⁴⁷ As a consequence, labour activists and electoral candidates only briefly touched upon the question of the unemployed in their discussions and public speeches.⁴⁸ To a certain extent, this is also true of agricultural labourers. Labourers in the rural districts surrounding Bristol were far from passive during the war, but their activities do not appear to have been actively supported or even considered by Bristol-based trade unionists.⁴⁹ On the rare occasion that they did discuss the plight of rural labourers,

⁴² WDP, 7 January 1918.

⁴³ The 1918 Representation of the People Act granted the right to vote to women householders and university graduates over thirty. Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, p. 188; S. Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914* (Princeton, 1987), p. 221; M. Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace 1906-1918* (London, 1978), p. 167.

⁴⁴ Election leaflet of E. Bevin, 1918, BRO 44562/2.

⁴⁵ WDP, 2 December 1918; 4 December 1918, 12 December 1918; Election leaflet of T. C. Lewis, 1918, BRO 32080/TC6/2/1.

⁴⁶ Lynch, *A Tale of Three Cities*, p. 153. Drake notes that unemployment 'practically disappeared'. Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 68.

⁴⁷ WDP, 11 November 1918.

⁴⁸ WDP, 12 December 1918. Marwick, *The Deluge*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Throughout summer 1918, the six branches of the NALRWU in West Gloucestershire demanded higher wages and a shorter working week. WDP, 20 May 1918; 7 June 1918. Nationally, the number of

they tended to implicitly downplay or dismiss their concerns by subsuming them within the broader 'land problem'. For instance, at a conference on this topic organised by the trades' council in 1917, activists spent more time discussing land nationalisation, mining royalties, and home colonisation than the question of labourers' wages and conditions. A Labour party advert printed in the *Western Daily Press* in 1918 took a similar view. Under the heading 'The Land', the advert declared that the Labour party would, in the following order, tax landlords, nationalise the land, free industry from ground rents and royalties, and, finally, ensure 'fair play' for the agricultural labourer. This acknowledgement of the labourer, however brief, was at least more sympathetic than the view put forward by Luke Bateman, Labour's candidate in Bristol East in 1918. While he condemned previous governments for neglecting the agricultural industry, he did so because it drove 'poorly-paid agricultural labourers into towns to compete in the labour market and bring down wages'.⁵⁰

Finally, the restrictive nature of labour activists' class identity was evident in their statements on the themes of race and nationality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the war drew out many of the racial and nationalistic assumptions that underpinned this identity. The minority in Bristol who opposed the war fought strenuously against the tide of public opinion by emphasising the internationalist character of the working class.⁵¹ Nevertheless, statements of this kind were confined to a small group of labour activists, especially in the early stages of the war. Instead, most of the city's labour leaders supported the war effort and couched their pro-war appeals in highly nationalistic terms.⁵² In their speeches and written statements, they argued that national unity between all classes was of paramount importance because the British (or, sometimes, English) nation was under threat. Frank Sheppard was a particularly strong advocate of this stance. If Britain had refused to enter the war, he asserted, then 'everlasting shame and an early decay of our nationality would have followed'.⁵³ For Sheppard, the cause of the war was 'neither here nor there' because he would have supported his country even if it were to blame. A. A. Senington of the ILP held similar views and claimed to support the war, in opposition to many within his party,

NALRWU branches rose from 350 in 1914 to 1,537 in 1918. R. Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle! The History of the Farm Workers' Union* (London, 1981), p. 165.

⁵⁰ *WDP*, 5 February 1917; 12 December 1918.

⁵¹ For examples, see speeches at May Day demonstrations: *WDP*, 8 May 1916; 7 May 1917.

⁵² For examples elsewhere, see Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 146-147.

⁵³ Letter 'F. Sheppard' to *WDP*, 11 November 1914.

'as an Englishman'.⁵⁴ Though he agreed with his pacifist colleagues on 'questions concerning capital and labour', he believed that industrial issues had, since the outbreak of the war, diminished in importance. In the current conflict, he argued, 'they stood as a nation first'.⁵⁵

In Bristol, there was nothing particularly novel about statements of this kind. Labour activists in the city, after all, had been assigning distinctive British qualities to the working class long before 1914. Developments during the war years, far from encouraging activists to change their views, merely gave them new opportunities through which to express their long-held assumptions about gender, place, and nationality. The employment of women workers during the war, for example, did not stop activists from holding a gendered and male-centric conception of the working class. As before 1914, they continued to offer moral and practical support to women workers in their struggles for higher wages and improved working conditions, but primarily as a way to protect the position and wages of the working man. They perceived the struggles of agricultural labourers in similar terms. While they continued to offer sympathy with the plight of rural labourers, and proposed a range of solutions to resolve the land question, their main concern was to prevent their migration into towns and cities. There was thus very little change in male labour activists' perception of who was, and who was not, part of the working class through the war years.

There were also ideological continuities between pre-war and wartime labourism. Again, for most labour activists in Bristol, the war years merely served to validate many of their pre-war views on ideological questions. This was true for the idea of collectivism, which, due to the unprecedented growth of the wartime state, came further into the realm of practical politics. At the same time, activists also demonstrated a commitment to the other core concepts that had shaped pre-war labourism. For example, they continued to emphasise the concepts of rights and liberties, especially when they felt that the wartime state had violated the rights of the workers by introducing legislation such as the Defence of the Realm Act.⁵⁶ While political activity largely diminished during the war years, they also continued to stress the constitutional and democratic basis of their demands, particularly in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in 1917. This commitment to the core concepts

⁵⁴ *BT&M*, 10 November 1915, BRO 32080/TC10/24(a); *WDP*, 10 November 1915.

⁵⁵ *WDP*, 10 November 1915. For other examples, see speeches at trade union and Labour party meetings: *WDP*, 14 June 1915; 13 December 1918.

⁵⁶ Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions: Volume 2*, pp. 153-154.

of labourism and, before that, working-class radicalism, was perhaps most evident in the Labour party's 1918 general election programmes. Although many of the individual demands within these programmes were certainly new, they were still based upon the pre-existing conceptual framework of labourist ideology.

Owing to the political truce established at a local and national level, there was little political activity for labour activists to engage in before mid-to-late 1918.⁵⁷ The formation of a number of wartime committees, though, presented the Bristol Labour party with an opportunity to strengthen its representation on governing bodies.⁵⁸ For labour activists, this desire for labour representation emanated, as before 1914, from their class-inflected conception of democracy. In this view, labour representation on wartime committees was both necessary and justified owing to the numerical dominance of the city's working-class community. Immediately after the declaration of war, Ernest Bevin proposed the formation of a 'citizen's committee' that would, he hoped, represent all classes of the community.⁵⁹ This emphasis on the right of all classes to a fair and proportionate share of political representation pervaded Labour's 1918 election campaign. At one of his campaign meetings, Bevin argued that as the great majority of the nation were working people, and 'as they believed that it was right for the majority to rule', the Labour party 'ought to have government in their hands'.⁶⁰ The coalition of Liberals and Conservatives also presented the Labour party with an opportunity to present themselves as the true heirs of nineteenth-century democratic and radical traditions. T. C. Lewis' election leaflet put forward a range of classical radical demands, such as the abolition of the House of Lords and adult suffrage, and stated that only the Labour party could establish 'true democracy'.⁶¹ Labour candidates even criticised the nature of the 1918 election contest in these terms. In contrast to the undemocratic coalition, which had manipulated the electoral process through its distribution of 'coupons', Labour, proclaimed Ernest Bevin, stood for a 'free and unfettered Parliament'.⁶²

The central place afforded to a 'free Parliament' in Labour's campaign demonstrates activists' ongoing commitment to a positive and democratic reading of the constitution. The Russian Revolutions of 1917, though sympathised with, did not

⁵⁷ No municipal elections took place between November 1913 and November 1919 in Bristol.

⁵⁸ *BO*, 26 September 1914; *WDP*, 16 February 1916; 8 May 1916.

⁵⁹ *WDP*, 10 August 1914.

⁶⁰ *WDP*, 9 December 1918.

⁶¹ Election leaflet of T. C. Lewis, 1918, BRO 32080/TC6/2/1.

⁶² Bevin at a campaign meeting, reported in *WDP*, 7 December 1918.

convince activists to abandon this interpretation.⁶³ In fact, if anything, the perceived threat of Bolshevism encouraged Labour candidates to reaffirm their commitment to parliamentary and gradualist methods of reform. Bevin, for instance, claimed that a strong Labour party in the House of Commons would act as a 'bulwark against Revolution'. 'Evolution', he maintained, 'was the only possible method of securing emancipation for the working people'.⁶⁴ Others promoted the programme of the Labour party in similar terms. Luke Bateman downplayed the revolutionary nature of land nationalisation and denied that there was anything particularly violent about this demand.⁶⁵ At another election meeting, one activist condemned all action of a 'violent and unjustifiable' nature, while another claimed that the Labour party only favoured 'constitutional methods and moral persuasion'. Even supporters who interpreted the party's programme in extreme terms spoke only of a '*constitutional* revolution'.⁶⁶ Wartime events did little to break activists' commitment to extending, rather than subverting, the existing constitutional framework.

They also retained a strong sense of loyalty to the concepts of rights and liberty. Like their predecessors, labour activists interpreted these concepts through the lens of class by speaking of, for example, the rights of the workers.⁶⁷ It also became common for activists to use a language of rights when discussing various war-related questions.⁶⁸ Indeed, for some, the overall purpose of the war was to defend liberty and to protect the rights of small nations.⁶⁹ They also used these terms when discussing domestic questions and, in particular, the government's perceived curtailment of political and industrial rights. In 1915, the trades' council condemned the government's policy on pub opening times as an 'attack upon our liberties by puritanical prohibitionists'.⁷⁰ They directed their anger towards the regulations under the Conscription and Defence of the Realm Acts, the repeal of which became a central part of their 1918 election campaign. Ernest Bevin's election leaflet promised voters that a Labour government would repeal this legislation as well as conscription and other measures that interfered with free speech and the

⁶³ A local committee of the Provisional Committee of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council was organised in Bristol, but seems to have faded rapidly. Clinton, *Trade Union Rank and File*, p. 115; *WDP*, 30 July 1917.

⁶⁴ *WDP*, 14 December 1918; 24 December 1917.

⁶⁵ *WDP*, 2 December 1918.

⁶⁶ *WDP*, 24 December 1917; 2 December 1918; 6 December 1918; 10 December 1918; 14 December 1918: Emphasis added.

⁶⁷ For examples, see NUBSO CR, 1916, MRC 547/P/1/32; *WDP*, 7 December 1918.

⁶⁸ Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 136-141.

⁶⁹ *BO*, 27 March 1915.

⁷⁰ *WDP*, 19 April 1915; *BO*, 08 May 1915.

press.⁷¹ T. C. Lewis' leaflet offered similar promises and complained that the legislation had 'restricted personal liberty' and 'freedom of speech'.⁷² James Kaylor, summarising this sense of anger, claimed that trade unionists had put their hard-won rights to one side during the war and, therefore, they now demanded that the government fulfil its pledge to restore trade union rights.⁷³

Although they condemned government restrictions on civil and trade union liberties, labour activists in Bristol advocated greater state intervention in certain areas of economic activity. Almost immediately after the declaration of the war, the trades' council demanded the regulation of food prices and government control of all foodstuffs. At this early stage of the war, activists anticipated an increase in suffering of 'the people' and argued that only 'massive government intervention to control the allocation and price of basic necessities' would prevent this.⁷⁴ Statist demands also featured prominently in the Labour party's 1918 election programme.⁷⁵ T. C. Lewis' leaflet proposed, amongst other things, a 'just and generous provision' for discharged soldiers and sailors, the state maintenance of children's education, full provision for civilian war workers, the retention by the state of all raw material in its possession, and the socialisation of the banks, railways, mines, minerals, and all forms of monopoly. James Kaylor favoured punitive taxation for those who had profited from the war and the nationalisation of 'everything...necessary for human life'. Ernest Bevin, in a statement used against him by his opponents, reportedly stated that he 'could not see the necessity for capital being privately owned'.⁷⁶ As the *Western Daily Press* argued, these collectivist sentiments seemed to be based upon a 'measureless belief in the capacity of Government departments to control gigantic business enterprises'.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Election leaflet of E. Bevin, 1918, BRO 44562/2.

⁷² Election leaflet of T. C. Lewis, 1918, BRO 32080/TC6/2/1. The other Labour candidates offered the same: *WDP*, 21 November 1918; 16 December 1918.

⁷³ *WDP*, 28 November 1918.

⁷⁴ Large and Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council*, p. 14; *WDP*, 7 August 1914; 10 August 1914; *BO*, 15 August 1914; General Secretary's MR, 4 May 1915, BRO 32080/TC10/24(b).

⁷⁵ In June 1918, the Labour party conference adopted the proposals outlined in *Labour and the New Social Order*, a pamphlet drawn up largely by Sidney Webb. Historians have offered contrasting interpretations of this document. See Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, p. 13; McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. 104; Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, p. 13; G. Phillips, *The Rise of the Labour Party 1893-1931* (London, 1992), p. 30.

⁷⁶ Election leaflet of T. C. Lewis, 1918, BRO 32080/TC6/2/1; *WDP*, 25 November 1918; 28 November 1918; 10 December 1918.

⁷⁷ *WDP*, 15 November 1918.

These policies were consistent with the national Labour party's newly adopted and thoroughly collectivist constitution and programme.⁷⁸ While some historians have seen the adoption of *Labour and the New Social Order* as representing an ideological shift within the Labour party, there was nothing particularly new, in Bristol at least, about the collectivist accent of Labour's message.⁷⁹ As we have seen, the majority of labour activists in Bristol had been advocating a number of collectivist proposals since at least the 1880s and had campaigned for greater state control and ownership in numerous parliamentary and municipal campaigns since that time. The collectivist tone of labourism had undoubtedly become stronger since the 1880s. Yet, this did not represent a significant departure, but an ongoing evolution within, rather than against, labourist ideology. Indeed, the other concepts that had shaped this ideology before the war, and, before it, working-class radical ideology, remained at the core of wartime labourism. The strong emphasis on democracy in Labour's 1918 programme and the demand for increased labour representation had featured in radical and labour programmes since the early 1870s. The programme's constitutionalist ethos, and its emphasis on the sovereignty of Parliament and the representative basis of the constitution, had long been at the core of radical and labour activists' political outlooks. The programme's claim to defend and extend the political and industrial rights and liberties of the workers was also far from new. In Bristol, the war changed the programmatic expression of labourism, but it did not change its core conceptual framework.

6.2 Northampton

The First World War proved to be a turning point in Northampton's political history.⁸⁰ Before the war, the Northampton Labour Representation Committee (NLRC) was composed of a small but vocal socialist section that strongly favoured political independence, and a larger Lib-Lab current that continued to express conciliatory sentiments towards the Liberal party. By the end of 1918, the experiences of the war years had transformed this fragile alliance into a unified, wholly independent, and ambitious electoral machine. This transformation was a direct consequence of three

⁷⁸ Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, p. 12.

⁷⁹ For examples of this view, see Phillips, *The Rise of the Labour Party*, p. 30; J. Tomlinson, 'Labour and the economy' in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 52.

⁸⁰ The war years had a similar political impact in other constituencies throughout Britain. For examples, see Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour', pp. 174-175; Wrigley, 'Liberals and the Desire for Working-Class Representation in Battersea', p. 126.

wartime developments. Firstly, the relative absence of anti-war sentiment within the local labour and socialist movement helped to give the NLRC an internal unity that it did not have before the war. With the outbreak of war, any lingering political differences between its distinct sections were quickly set aside. The majority of delegates on the trades' council, which represented the town's ever-growing trade union movement, interpreted the war as a defence of the 'rights of small nations' and supported the government's efforts to defeat 'Prussian militarism'.⁸¹ The local BSP, which argued that 'Socialism, Patriotism, and Internationalism' were 'perfectly reconcilable', was also fiercely pro-war.⁸² While anti-war opinion did exist within the local ILP branch, this was by no means universal amongst its members.⁸³ As in Bristol, unity on the question of the war allowed the Northampton Labour party to present a relatively united front when it contested the first post-war general election in 1918.

Secondly, the presence of labour representatives on local wartime committees helped to strengthen a sense of the unity within the NLRC. Throughout the war, members from all sections of the party joined a range of local bodies, such as the Committee for the Prevention of Distress, the War Pensions Committee, and the Food Control Committee.⁸⁴ After overcoming their initial hesitation, delegates from the NLRC also joined the voluntary recruitment campaign and the local Military Tribunal.⁸⁵ These experiences were particularly significant in Northampton because, for the first time, delegates sat as representatives of the Labour party, not as members of the BSP, ILP, or other constituent sections. Furthermore, the involvement of the NLRC in various cross-party committees and schemes enhanced the party's prestige within local political circles. This was especially true in the case of the Allied War Fund Committee, a charitable scheme that channelled funds to various war-related causes. Devised by James Gribble, a founding member of the NLRC, the scheme had raised a total of £27,778 by the war's end.⁸⁶ This example of public service was commended by a wide range of eminent individuals and

⁸¹ NTC M, 1 October 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

⁸² *SP*, October 1914; June 1915; December 1915; July 1916: The local BSP followed Henry Hyndman into the pro-war National Socialist Party in 1916. For examples of 'anti-German' sentiments in the SDF/BSP, see Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, pp. 104-105; 117; 121-126.

⁸³ Frederick Roberts, secretary of the ILP and the trades' council, supported the war and sat on the local recruitment committee. The most prominent anti-war member of the NLRC was John Flinton Harris, the party's chairman and ILP member. Flinton Harris offered to resign from the trades' council executive due to its stance on recruiting. NTC M, 17 November 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

⁸⁴ NTC M, 27 August 1914; 19 April 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; *NM*, 17 March 1916; 17 August 1917.

⁸⁵ NTC M, 18 November 1914; 27 October 1915; 10 March 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; Clinton, *Trade Union Rank and File*, p. 63.

⁸⁶ NTC M, 21 April 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; *NM*, 28 June 1918.

organisations in the town, an expression of gratitude that Gribble, an erstwhile militant socialist, was not used to. He had, after all, been 'preaching simple things to Northampton for 25 years, but this was the first time he had been able to induce people to take any notice of them!'⁸⁷

Finally, labour activists' break with their former conciliatory political strategy emerged out of the contrasting wartime fortunes of the NLRC and the local Liberal party. Throughout the war, a pacifist element emerged within the local Liberal party that opposed its leaders' attitude to the war and the political truce.⁸⁸ In fact, a number of activists, such as John Webb JP, left the Liberal party altogether during this period to join the NLRC.⁸⁹ Divisions within the local Liberal party were particularly apparent in the divergent attitudes and actions of the town's Liberal MPs. Whereas Charles McCurdy remained a loyal supporter of David Lloyd George throughout the war, and participated enthusiastically in the various recruitment and conscription campaigns, Hastings Lees-Smith exhibited scepticism towards the coalition, its policies, and, increasingly, towards the Liberal party itself.⁹⁰ The perceived weakness of the Liberal party, especially when compared to the impressive wartime growth of local NLRC-affiliated trade unions, convinced labour activists of the desirability and feasibility of independent political action.⁹¹ This sense of confidence in their own strength grew further with the affiliation of the Northampton Co-operative Society and the decision of the Labour party conference in 1918 to admit members on an individual basis.⁹² As a result of this change, local activists now used public meetings as a direct recruiting tool, which those in

⁸⁷ *NDE*, 28 June 1916; *NM*, 30 June 1916.

⁸⁸ *NDE*, 19 November 1918; *NI*, 23 November 1918: The *NDE* reported that there were a 'few dissentients' at a Liberal meeting called to endorse Charles McCurdy as the Coalition candidate.

⁸⁹ *NM*, 15 February 1918; *NDE*, 10 December 1918: Webb did so because 'the Liberal party had drifted away from the true path of democracy'.

⁹⁰ *NM*, 26 July 1918. Lee-Smiths' active military service in France had left a deep impression on him and influenced his decision to oppose conscription in the House of Commons, and to join the Union of Democratic Control, which displayed broad scepticism to the conduct of the war. *NM*, 5 May 1916; *NTC M*, 10 January 1916, *NRO 1977/44/NTC3*; M. Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War* (Oxford, 1971), p. 47.

⁹¹ Growth was particularly marked in the local NUBSO branches, which, in total, increased from 9,715 members in August 1914 to 14,117 by August 1918. *NUBSO MR*, August 1914, *MRC 547/P/1/30*; *NUBSO MR*, August 1918, *MRC 547/P/1/34*.

⁹² The Co-Operative Society represented 9,000 workers. *NI*, 19 January 1918; *NM*, 29 March 1918. For changes to the Labour party constitution, see McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. 95. The NLRC did actually organise ward committees before 1918, but they were always in a 'nebulous' state. G. Atwell, 'The History of Northampton Labour Party 1914-1971' (unpublished manuscript, Northamptonshire Central Library, 1975), p. 13.

Northampton appeared to do to great effect throughout the 1918 election campaign.⁹³

By the time the armistice was signed, the Northampton Labour party was stronger and more united than it had been in 1914. It was also a more independent organisation. In 1916, the party abandoned its exclusive emphasis on municipal politics by agreeing to contest parliamentary elections.⁹⁴ Its leaders also overcame their initial wariness of the Labour party, sending two delegates to its national conference in 1917 and affiliating to the party in the same year.⁹⁵ As a result, the party contested for parliamentary honours for the first time in December 1918. Although its candidate, Walter Halls of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), was unsuccessful in his attempt to unseat the Coalition candidate, the local party's adoption of a firmly independent political strategy represented a significant turning point in local progressive politics. Former Lib-Labs now shared socialists' emphasis on the virtues of independence. The historic and pragmatic Lib-Lab alliance in Northampton, which had dominated progressive politics in the town since at least the late 1860s, finally passed out of existence under the strain of war and its political consequences.

The war, however, did not have such a transformative impact on labour activists' conception of class and the social order. Before the war, labour activists in Northampton and, before them, working-class radical activists saw the social order as one in which class distinctions but not class antagonisms were paramount. Throughout the war, this non-conflictual sense of class remained the most frequently articulated view of class relations among labour activists in Northampton. At the end of 1918, they continued to emphasise the distinctive and unique characteristics, experiences, and interests of the working class and its organisations. They also continued to renounce the principle of class conflict, seeking instead to correct the class imbalances within society through negotiation and legislation. This is not to suggest that oppositional statements were absent from labour discourse. But, as in Bristol, statements of this kind were simply not prevalent enough to suggest that the local labour movement as a whole had fully abandoned their pre-existing ideas about class and society. In fact, some activists moved in quite the opposite direction and

⁹³ The *NDE* reported that seventy members of the National Union of Railwaymen joined the party after a public meeting in November 1918. Although probably an exaggeration, party activist Leonard Smith claimed that 600 individual members had joined the party since the opening of the election campaign. *NDE*, 18 November 1918; 2 December 1918.

⁹⁴ NTC M, 21 June 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; NLRC AR, 1917, BL GRC 08139.CCC.2.

⁹⁵ NLRC AR, 1917, BL GRC 08139.CCC.2; *NM*, 7 December 1917.

began to use conciliatory language far more frequently than they had done in the past. Despite a number of significant social and organisational changes throughout the war, labour activists in Northampton still considered old working-class radical ideas about class and society to be entirely relevant in the wartime and immediate post-war environments.

The exclusivist element in this conception of class relations featured prominently in labour activists' public statements on the war. While they largely acknowledged the need for cross-class unity during the war, labour activists still believed that the workers contributed, suffered, and lost most during the conflict. For example, in 1916, the newspaper of the pro-war BSP branch demanded that 'wealth and profit pay for war' because nine-tenths of the burden had fallen on the shoulders of the working class.⁹⁶ Labour alderman William Pitts had offered a similar view two years earlier when he argued that the workers would have to 'pay in blood and coin' whichever side was victorious.⁹⁷ This class-based view of the war effort led some activists to criticise those classes that, they felt, had not contributed sufficiently. One activist, who identified himself at this time as a 'revolutionary socialist', went so far as to support conscription as a way to force the 'middle-class ... fancy sock brigade' to do their fair share of the fighting. Advocacy of conscription was certainly a minority viewpoint in labour circles, but this hostility to the middle class still found favour among trades' council delegates. A. H. Cox, for example, agreed that 'a large body of middle-class young men' who were 'physically capable' had decided not to join the army. 'The working-class', on the other hand, 'had sent a far larger proportion of its young men'.⁹⁸

As these statements suggest, exclusivist terms such as 'the workers' and 'working class' continued to be the most commonly used social designations in labour discourse. There were also continuities in the way labour activists used broader expressions such as 'the people'. Frederick Roberts in particular continued to use broad and narrow terms interchangeably when writing the annual reports of the trades' council and the NLRC. In 1915, for example, he wrote in relatively ambiguous terms about 'the people' and Labour's desire to bring about benefits for

⁹⁶ *SP*, January 1916.

⁹⁷ NUBSO MR, October 1914, MRC 547/P/1/30. For other examples, see NUBSO MR, February 1915, MRC 547/P/1/31; *SP*, February 1915; August 1915; NTC M, 17 February 1915; 7 November 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

⁹⁸ NTC M, 16 June 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

the 'many rather than the few'.⁹⁹ In the NLRC's 1916 annual report, however, he used more restrictive terms, such as 'the poorer classes' and 'the workers', whilst also claiming that the NLRC were 'ready for battle for *the people's* cause'. Similarly, in the party's 1917 annual report, he used a variety of terms, including 'the people', the 'Democracy', and 'the workers of Northampton', without distinction.¹⁰⁰ This blurring of the distinctions between broad and socially exclusive terms also characterised the language of Will Rogers, a member of the Northampton Co-operative Society and the parliamentary candidate for nearby Daventry in 1918. At one meeting during his campaign, he proudly announced that the Labour party was a 'free, independent *working-class* party', but argued that it essentially worked for the 'government by the people for the people'. At times, activists used both inclusive and exclusive terms within the same sentence. Condemning the tax system as pressing 'too heavily on *the worker*', Rogers went on to suggest that '*democracy* should...be relieved of the burden'.¹⁰¹ Like their working-class radical ancestors, then, Rogers and Roberts merely considered 'democracy' and 'the people' to be alternative descriptions for 'the workers', rather than definitions of a social group that included both workers and employers.

The rhetoric employed by Walter Halls, the Labour party's candidate for Northampton in 1918, also demonstrates the survival of old working-class radical conceptions of class.¹⁰² At election meetings and in his written statements, Halls frequently made direct and explicit appeals to the working-class section of the community. For example, at one meeting, he insisted that he had 'always fought hardest for *his class*' and denied that he had ever had a 'first-class railway fare'. Unlike his Liberal opponent, who had been 'born with a silver spoon in his mouth', Halls claimed to know 'what poverty was' and, as a result, believed that he could look after the wants of the 'working people' of Northampton. There was little sense, therefore, that Halls sought to win over non-working-class voters. At times, he did use more socially inclusive terms. However, often in the same speech, and sometimes in the same sentence, Halls used broader and more class-specific terms without distinction. He claimed that his opponent Charles McCurdy had '*vested interests...hanging around his neck*' but also described him as the '*capitalist*

⁹⁹ NTC AR, 1915, NRO 1977/4/NTC3.

¹⁰⁰ NLRC AR, 1916; 1917, BL GRC 08139.CCC.2.

¹⁰¹ *NDE*, 26 November 1918.

¹⁰² Indeed, the Liberal *NDE* complained that 'we hear a good deal in this election about "class"'. *NDE*, 11 December 1918.

candidate'.¹⁰³ To oppose 'vested interests', the 'workers', he claimed, must have greater control of political affairs in the future.¹⁰⁴

Some labour activists began to use more antagonistic language in their public political appeals throughout the war. In 1918, for example, one of the local branches of the NUBSO passed a resolution in favour of industrial unionism, which, they believed, would 'combat Organised Capital'. Leonard Smith, the local branch's representative to the NUBSO conference in 1918, supported the resolution as an effective way 'to combat the capitalists' and to achieve 'emancipation' for trade unionists.¹⁰⁵ Some of Walter Halls' supporters also used oppositional language to attack his opponent, Charles McCurdy, during the 1918 election campaign.¹⁰⁶ Yet, while statements of this kind were more common than they had been before the war, they were not widespread enough to suggest that, by the end of 1918, adversarial images of society had become dominant among labour activists. Indeed, there are examples of activists moderating their views towards employers and the capitalist class during this period. In 1911, James Gribble had favoured 'industrial warfare' and the secession of his union from the Labour party, but, by early 1920, he had begun to urge 'the workers' to '*convert* the organisers of industry to see that their greater happiness was bound up with collective ownership'.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is important to remember that resolutions from trade union branches did not necessarily represent the views of the wider membership, especially when one considers the poor attendance rate of trade union meetings.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, while there was a discernible shift towards an antagonistic vision of class relations among *some* labour activists during this period, this was far from a universal development in Northampton.

There were also continuities in the way local activists conceived of and defined the working-class section of the community. In the years immediately prior to the war, labour activists in Northampton had broadened their conception of class by welcoming agricultural labourers as fellow members in the industrial movement. There was to be no similar process of inclusion for other categories of worker, such

¹⁰³ *NDE*, 2 December 1918; 4 December 1918; 5 December 1918; 6 December 1918: Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁴ Letter 'W. Halls' to *NDE*, 6 December 1918: Emphasis added. The *Socialist Pioneer* also used 'the workers' and 'the people' interchangeably. See *SP*, October 1916.

¹⁰⁵ NUBSO CR, 1918, MRC 547/P/1/34.

¹⁰⁶ One activist wrote that McCurdy had defended blacklegs and had the backing of 'manufacturers and exploiters'. Letter 'J. W. Clarke' to *NDE*, 10 December 1918; *NDE*, 14 December 1918.

¹⁰⁷ NUBSO MR, December 1911, MRC 547/P/1/27; *NM*, 9 January 1920: Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Griffin, 'The Northampton Boot and Shoe Industry', p. 165: By 1916, even though branch membership had reached over 5,000, union meetings could still be attended by as little as 20 people.

as women and foreign workers, throughout the war years. In fact, this restrictive definition of the working class survived the war years despite changes in the composition of Northampton's booming boot and shoe industry.¹⁰⁹ After employers had exhausted the supply of male operatives in trying to meet the demand for army boots, they began to introduce women's labour, with the reluctant agreement of the NUBSO, in traditionally male-only departments.¹¹⁰ There is little evidence to suggest that male labour activists' attitudes to women workers changed as a result of these developments. For example, at a well-attended conference on women's labour in 1916, male trade unionists offered their support to women in their struggle for higher wages and better working conditions, but expressed their opposition in principle to the further employment of women.¹¹¹ James Gribble summarised these views in the *Socialist Pioneer* in 1916. The advent of women into departments that had traditionally been regarded as occupations for men, he argued, had caused 'considerable concern to officials and members of trades unions'.¹¹² Like other trade union leaders in the town, Gribble believed that employers should pay women the same wage rates as men.¹¹³ At the same time, he desired the government's assurances that the employment of women was to be a temporary measure only. If this development continued after the war, he claimed, trade unionists' work of '40 or 50 years' would be undone.¹¹⁴

This defensive response to the introduction of women's labour emanated from the assumption that 'the worker', except in a number of specific occupations or industries, was male. In particular, this attitude was noticeable in the way male labour activists used gendered terms when discussing the lives and experiences of the workers. For example, terms such as 'the men' and 'workmen' still pervaded the monthly and conference reports of the NUBSO during the war, even though the union had a significant number of female members.¹¹⁵ Labour activists and candidates also drew a clear distinction between men and women during the 1918

¹⁰⁹ *NM*, 7 August 1914; *NI*, 12 September 1914; NUBSO MR, October 1914, MRC 547/P/1/30; NTC M, 18 November 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹¹⁰ NUBSO MR, September 1915, MRC 547/P/1/31; *NM*, 26 November 1915; 3 March 1916; NUBSO CR, 1916, MRC 547/P/1/32: In 1917, there was a strike in a local factory over the question of women performing traditionally male tasks. *NM*, 30 March 1917.

¹¹¹ NTC M, 22 March 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; *NM*, 24 March 1916.

¹¹² *SP*, August 1916.

¹¹³ Trades' council delegates unanimously endorsed this view. NTC M, 15 December 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹¹⁴ *SP*, August 1916.

¹¹⁵ NUBSO CR, 1916, MRC 547/P/1/32; NUBSO MR, March 1918; May 1918, MRC 547/P/1/34. By the war's end, 20,000 out of 69,000 NUBSO members were women. Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, pp. 143-144.

election campaign. Will Rogers, the Labour candidate for Daventry, told voters that the (presumably male) trade unionist 'kept up the wages' while the Co-operative movement 'enabled the wife to spend them'.¹¹⁶ At times, Walter Halls, Labour's candidate in Northampton, used more inclusive terms, such as 'working men and women', when addressing campaign meetings.¹¹⁷ Still, although women could now be returned as Members of Parliament, Halls urged voters to send 'Labour *men*' and '*men* of their own order to manage their own affairs'.¹¹⁸ As before the war, labour activists also continued to consider political and industrial issues such as housing and unemployment in gendered terms.¹¹⁹ For Halls, housing was primarily a 'women's question' because he assumed the male to be the breadwinner. On the other hand, he saw unemployment chiefly as a male problem and urged 'the Government...to have...plans ready for finding work for *men*'.¹²⁰

As with the Bristol example, it is difficult to assess labour activists' attitudes towards the unemployed owing to the wartime prosperity of Northampton's industries. The trades' council had initially anticipated distress in the first weeks of the war and duly formed a Vigilance Committee to 'watch over the interests of the workers'.¹²¹ Due to the unexpected lack of distress in the town, especially in the town's staple trade, the Committee had very little work to do.¹²² In November 1914, for example, the No. 1 branch of the NUBSO reported that the total number of unemployed on their books was zero, compared to 109 in the same month a year earlier.¹²³ It is far easier, however, to examine labour activists' attitudes towards agricultural labourers. Throughout the war, the trades' council assisted the NALRWU in its efforts to organise rural workers throughout Northamptonshire and even accepted the union as an affiliate member in 1915.¹²⁴ Northampton-based trade unionists hosted NALRWU conferences, spoke at the organisation's meetings, and acted as leading officials within the union.¹²⁵ As in the immediate pre-war period, labour activists continued to consider agricultural labourers, unlike, presumably, women workers, as just one subsection of a broadly conceived working class. For

¹¹⁶ *NM*, 6 December 1918.

¹¹⁷ For example, see *NDE*, 4 December 1918.

¹¹⁸ *NDE*, 11 December 1918.

¹¹⁹ Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, pp. 73-74.

¹²⁰ *NDE*, 22 November 1918; 25 November 1918.

¹²¹ NTC M, 19 August 1914; 27 August 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹²² NTC M, 18 November 1914; 20 January 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹²³ *NM*, 1 January 1915.

¹²⁴ NTC M, 18 November 1914; 17 March 1915; 21 April 1915; 19 May 1915; 14 October 1915; 28 June 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3. See also Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 376.

¹²⁵ *NM*, 10 May 1918.

example, James Bugby, a local railwayman, told a meeting of agricultural labourers in 1918 that there was an increasing sense of 'unity amongst *all sections of the workers*' and spoke of 'Labour...linking its forces' to 'sweep away poverty, injustice, and the...burdens under which *the poor* had struggled'.¹²⁶ Frederick Roberts of the Northampton ILP used similarly inclusive language when writing about the Burston School Strike, a dispute between NALRWU-sympathising teachers and a farmer-dominated school management committee in the village of Burston, Norfolk.¹²⁷ This strike was, he claimed, 'one of the most remarkable fights in *working-class history*'.¹²⁸

On the other hand, labour activists' attitudes towards foreign workers remained far from inclusive. Some, such as BSP councillor Fred Kirby, interpreted the war in highly nationalistic and even racial terms. During a local controversy involving a German-born tramways manager, Kirby proposed the locking up of all Germans and Austrians because they could not be trusted.¹²⁹ While these views were in the minority, other activists frequently justified their support for the war by evoking patriotic themes.¹³⁰ The trades' council resolved that Britain had entered the war to defend the 'rights of small nations' against 'Prussian militarism'.¹³¹ The local branch of the BSP offered a more theoretical justification for supporting the national basis of the war effort. As the *Socialist Pioneer* stated in 1915, 'Socialism, Patriotism, and Internationalism are perfectly reconcilable'. The author of the article claimed that socialists were patriots because they sought to defend their nation from outside aggression, whilst also working towards building prosperity within its borders.¹³²

The war forced activists to clarify their views of nationality, but it would be erroneous to suggest that their ideas were direct products of the wartime period.¹³³ As we have seen, patriotic themes had shaped the class identities of working-class radical and labour activists since the late 1860s. To some extent, this was also true of attitudes to women workers. Both working-class radical and labour activists in Northampton had long used gendered terms in their public and written discourse, and had made it clear that the gender of the worker was, for them at least, male. The

¹²⁶ *NM*, 23 August 1918.

¹²⁷ Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle!*, pp. 151-159. Roberts played a leading role in the strike.

¹²⁸ Financial appeal written by Roberts in 'The Burston School Strike' pamphlet, attached to NTC M, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹²⁹ NTC M, 1 October 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹³⁰ Kirby was expelled from the BSP branch. *NI*, 24 October 1914; *SP*, September 1914. The trades' council also defended the tramways manager. NTC M, 28 September 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹³¹ NTC M, 1 October 1914, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹³² *SP*, December 1915.

¹³³ For the long tradition of patriotism on the British left, see Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, p. 122.

wartime increase in female employment certainly encouraged male activists to consider questions about women's role in the workplace to a greater extent than before.¹³⁴ Yet, while there was, except in the case of the unemployed, a marked shift in the prevalence of discussions about other categories of worker, there was no corresponding shift in the attitudes of male activists. Their perception of who was, and was not, part of 'the workers' remained largely unchanged from the pre-war period.

A similar line of continuity can be drawn between pre-war and wartime labourist ideology. Before the war, labour activists in Northampton had articulated an ideology that, in conceptual terms, differed very little from nineteenth-century working-class radicalism. While a number of developments during the First World War contributed to the adaptation of labourist demands, they did not significantly alter the intellectual framework upon which they were based. Indeed, as in Bristol, labour activists' new demands still rested on the conceptual foundations of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty. Democracy in particular remained a core concept in wartime labourism's morphology. While the question of contesting elections largely diminished in importance during the war, activists still sought to realise their long-held goal of increased labour representation by demanding representation on various wartime committees. By the end of 1918, trade unionist and socialist delegates sat on the Citizens' Relief Committee, the Military Tribunal, and Naval and Military War Pensions Act committee, which represented a marked rise in the Labour party's pre-war political influence.¹³⁵ As the war drew to a close, labour activists in Northampton, now free of their historic commitment to the Liberal party, began to demand a greater share of representation in the House of Commons.¹³⁶ James Gribble, speaking at the 1918 NUBSO conference, wanted his union to put forward as many candidates as possible, although he personally rejected the chance to stand again in Northampton.¹³⁷ This desire for parliamentary representation also found favour among a number of important local trade union

¹³⁴ Culleton, *Working-Class Culture, Women, and Britain*, p. 52; Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, pp. 201-203.

¹³⁵ *NM*, 14 August 1914; 21 August 1914; 28 August 1914; 10 March 1916; 17 March 1916; 7 April 1916; 17 August 1917; *NTC M*, 19 August 1914; 10 March 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; *SP*, October 1914; NUBSO MR, March 1917, MRC 547/P/1/33.

¹³⁶ NLRC AR, 1917, BL GRC 08139.CCC.2.

¹³⁷ NUBSO CR, 1918, MRC 547/P/1/34; *NM*, 7 June 1918.

branches, such as the NUR and the NUBSO No. 2 branch.¹³⁸ As a result, the NLRC selected Walter Halls as the first Labour parliamentary candidate in Northampton's history.

Throughout the subsequent election campaign, activists were keen to demonstrate their democratic credentials as well as their unswerving commitment to the constitutional order. In particular, they sought to distance themselves from extra-parliamentary ideas arriving from Europe and Russia after 1917. For instance, on the advice of Gribble, the trades' council refused to send delegates to the Leeds convention in 1917, which met to discuss the formation of workers' and soldiers' councils, or 'soviets', in Britain.¹³⁹ Accusations of Bolshevism during the 1918 election also encouraged activists to re-emphasise their loyalty to the constitution.¹⁴⁰ Halls denied that he was a revolutionary, insisting instead that 'it was the Coalitionists that were out for chaos; the Labour Party were out for a new social order'.¹⁴¹ In any case, the accusation that labour activists wished to overturn the existing order was entirely unfounded. As before the war, they did not consider there to be anything inherently wrong with the 'free and democratic character' of institutions such as the House of Commons.¹⁴² Rather, they criticised the composition of these institutions and argued that the relative lack of working-class representatives on these bodies prevented them from being truly representative. Like working-class radicals in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, labour activists in Northampton sought to improve, rather than subvert, the existing political order. As Leonard Smith and Walter Halls told a meeting of workers in 1918, it was only by placing more members 'of their own class' onto representative bodies that their truly 'democratic basis' would be realised.¹⁴³

The concepts of rights and liberty also remained at the core of wartime labourism. As well using the themes of justice and fairness when discussing the war effort, they also used a language of rights when discussing the extended powers of

¹³⁸ NLRC AR, 1917, BL GRC 08139.CCC.2: Thirteen out of fourteen affiliated societies of the NLRC favoured contesting national elections after the war. See also examples of trade union support for increased labour representation in *NDE*, 14 November 1918; 5 December 1918.

¹³⁹ *NM*, 20 July 1917; Clinton, *Trade Union Rank and File*, p. 115.

¹⁴⁰ *NM*, 13 December 1918: Charles McCurdy claimed that a section of the Labour party would 'hoist the Bolshevik banner and show themselves in their true colours' once in power. For Labour denials of this accusation, see *NDE*, 11 December 1918.

¹⁴¹ *NDE*, 11 December 1918.

¹⁴² NTC AR, 1915, NRO 1977/4/NTC3.

¹⁴³ *NDE*, 11 December 1918.

the state and conscription.¹⁴⁴ For Frederick Roberts, conscription was 'abhorrent' to 'liberty-loving Englishmen' and 'a serious menace' to the 'freedom and liberty of the Labour movement'.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, W. Belson of the trades' council considered it to be 'dangerous to the free action of trade unionists'.¹⁴⁶ This hostile attitude to the perceived violation of individual and trade union freedoms by the state did not prevent labour activists from supporting further state action in certain areas. For example, trades' council delegates favoured a strong government response to rising food prices so as to protect the working class from extortionate demands.¹⁴⁷ They also urged the government to set coal prices, to control shipping, and to impose rent controls.¹⁴⁸ Again, when they justified these demands, they repeatedly stressed the inequality of sacrifice during the war years. At a meeting on the topic in 1916, for example, James Gribble reportedly received a 'loud and prolonged cheer' when he argued that the government should conscript wealth rather than men.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, by the time of the 1918 election, the demand for the conscription of wealth had become an increasingly popular demand within local labour circles.¹⁵⁰

This demand was consistent with the collectivist nature of Labour's message in 1918. During the election campaign in Northampton, the Labour party candidate and his supporters demanded a far greater degree of state intervention than they had done before the war. As in Bristol, though, this represented a slight modification in activists' pre-existing ideology rather than a conversion to socialism. In contrast to socialists, labour activists still justified their support for statist solutions in practical terms, seeing them simply as an effective and, by the end of the war, proven method of achieving their historic goals. For example, Walter Halls told voters that he favoured selective state ownership because it would reduce both unemployment and the hours of work.¹⁵¹ Similarly, Mary Whitehurst of the trades' council advocated state action on housing because private enterprise had failed on the issue in the

¹⁴⁴ For examples, see *NM*, 16 October 1914; NUBSO MR, November 1915, MRC 547/P/1/31.

¹⁴⁵ NTC AR, 1915, NRO 1977/4/NTC3; NTC M, 16 June 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹⁴⁶ *NDE*, 13 December 1918.

¹⁴⁷ NTC M, 20 January 1915; 24 May 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3; *NM*, 7 August 1914; Clinton, *Trade Union Rank and File*, p. 66; Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 181.

¹⁴⁸ NTC M, 17 February 1915, NRO 1977/44/NTC3. For similar views, see NUBSO MR, February 1915, MRC 547/P/1/31; NTC M, 21 April 1915; 17 November 1915; 10 March 1916, NRO 1977/44/NTC3.

¹⁴⁹ *NM*, 1 December 1916.

¹⁵⁰ Trades' council delegates also passed a resolution demanding the 'conscription of wealth'. *NM*, 15 February 1918. For similar demands elsewhere, see A. Thorpe, *A History of The British Labour Party* (London, 1997), p. 42.

¹⁵¹ *NDE*, 25 November 1918.

past.¹⁵² Moreover, labourists still only favoured state ownership of *select* industries and state intervention in *certain spheres* of economic activity. There was, for instance, bitter resistance within the local and national NUBSO towards the government's decision to extend unemployment insurance to the boot and shoe trade.¹⁵³ This qualified advocacy of collectivist solutions was clearly distinct from that of local socialists, such as William Pitts, who believed that 'the people in their collective capacity' should take the 'whole means of life...over' to 'end profiteering altogether'.¹⁵⁴ At an election meeting in 1918, Alfred Slinn, a local Labour councillor, offered a perceptive analysis of the somewhat confusing distinction between labourism and socialism at this time. As a socialist, Slinn admitted that he wished to see 'reconstruction upon the basis of a Social Democratic Republic'. He acknowledged, however, that 'some of those present did not want Socialism'. Instead, they wanted 'security of employment, better wages, better housing, and food and other commodities at reasonable prices'.¹⁵⁵ This was an accurate description of labourism, an ideology that, whilst becoming even more collectivist in accent, did not undergo a significant conceptual transformation during the war years.

6.3 Summary

Although they failed in their attempt to achieve parliamentary representation in 1918, the Labour parties in Bristol and Northampton began to make steady gains in municipal elections in the immediate post-war era. By 1923, both parties had doubled their municipal representation and had achieved parliamentary success for the first time.¹⁵⁶ This post-war realignment of progressive politics was the product of both local and national developments, such as divisions within the Liberal party and the growing legitimisation of the Labour party, which fall outside the scope of this study. This study does confirm, however, that the post-war rise of the Labour party in Bristol and Northampton was not the outcome of a significant change in labour activists' understandings of class, ideology, and the social order during the war years.

¹⁵² *NDE*, 22 November 1918.

¹⁵³ Fox, *A History of the NUBSO*, p. 381; *NM*, 18 August 1916; 6 October 1916: In 1916, 14,400 local workers handed their notices in to protest against the insurance policy.

¹⁵⁴ NUBSO MR, June 1917, MRC 547/P/1/33. The *SP* argued that the war had proved that socialism was the 'only system under which the power of the State...can be fully developed'. *SP*, January 1917.

¹⁵⁵ *NDE*, 6 December 1918.

¹⁵⁶ At the end of 1923, the Bristol Labour party had nineteen councillors and aldermen and two MPs (out of a possible four). In Northampton, the Labour party had five councillors and aldermen and one MP (out of a possible one). *WDP*, 2 November 1923; 7 December 1923; *NM*, 2 November 1923; 14 December 1923.

Firstly, continuities with older political traditions were evident in the way labour activists continued to articulate a non-conflictual sense of class. More specifically, like their working-class radical and labour predecessors, they directed their appeals exclusively towards the working-class section of the community and sought to convince listeners and readers that their organisations were thoroughly class-based in composition and orientation. At the same time, and despite a slight yet discernible increase in antagonistic sentiments amongst *some* activists, their image of society remained thoroughly non-conflictual in tone. The majority of labour activists in Bristol and Northampton continued to prefer arbitration, negotiation, and industrial peace with employers to internecine strike action. As before the war, exclusivist attitudes were strong amongst labour activists, but antagonistic sentiments were not.

Secondly, there was continuity in the way male labour activists in Bristol and Northampton defined the working class. Industrial changes brought about by the war forced these activists to consider the lives and conditions of other workers, especially women, to a greater extent than ever before. Yet their language and attitudes continued to reveal the restrictive assumptions that lay behind their class identities. Most male activists continued to appeal to women primarily as wives and homemakers rather than as fellow workers, and continued to use highly gendered terms in their political discourse. The war also drew out activists' assumptions about nationality and, at times, race. Pro-war activists in Bristol and Northampton interpreted the war in thoroughly nationalistic terms and claimed that their democratic British instincts had forced them to sympathise with the nations that had been threatened by Prussian militarism. These sentiments, as we have seen, had long been a part of labour and working-class radical identities before 1914.

Finally, there were strong ideological continuities between pre-war and wartime labourism. While certain developments during the war changed the political demands of labour activists, it did not transform the ideological framework on which they were based. Indeed, it was their commitment to the concepts that had long defined this ideology that shaped their responses to a number of wartime problems. Thus, their desire for representation on wartime committees emanated from their class-based understanding of democracy. Their rejection of extra-parliamentary strategies was based on their continued faith in, and their democratic reading of, the English constitution. Their hostility to wartime legislation, such as the Defence of the

Realm Act and conscription, emerged from their notion that the constitution granted certain political and industrial rights to all individuals (or, at least, all men). As we have seen, their demands did become more collectivist throughout the war, as demonstrated in their statist electoral programmes of 1918. However, this did not represent the final transformation of labourism into socialism but simply the next stage in a long-running ideological evolution that had begun in the 1880s.

7: Conclusion

'The Labour movement of today [has] inherited everything that was good in the Radical movement of [my] boyhood'.¹

Walter Baker, Labour MP for Bristol East, 1924

'The ideals of militant radicalism which gave Northampton its special place in political history are reincarnated to-day in the Labour Party'.²

The Labour Outlook, Northampton by-election, 1920

In August 1914, the Bristol Labour Representation Committee was an alliance of trade unionists and socialists that had a modest electoral record and an affiliated membership of around 14,000.³ Just five years later, the reorganised Bristol Borough Labour Party had greatly enhanced its membership and had more than doubled its representation on the City Council.⁴ A similar process of growth occurred in Northampton, where, over the same period, the Labour Representation Council grew in membership size, financial resources, and municipal representation.⁵ The increase in strength and influence of local Labour parties during this period was far from unique to Bristol and Northampton. Between 1919 and 1922, Labour parties in a range of constituencies extended their organisations and made impressive gains in municipal and parliamentary by-elections.⁶ The growing strength of Labour in the post-war years coincided with the slow decline of the Liberal party, whose parliamentary representation more than halved between 1910 and 1922.⁷ By the end of 1924, after the experience of the first Labour government, Bristol and

¹ *WDP*, 9 December 1924.

² Quote taken from the Northampton Labour party's newspaper during Margaret Bondfield's by-election campaign in 1920. *The Labour Outlook*, 27 March 1920.

³ *WDP*, 1 January 1914; General Secretary's MR, 13 July 1914, BRO 32080/TC10/24(a); BTC AR, 1907, BRO 32080/TC1/4/14; Atkinson, *Trade Unions in Bristol*, pp. 22-27; NUBSO MR, December 1914, MRC 547/P/1/30: This figure has been calculated from various sources owing to non-existence of the BLRC's 1914 annual report. As a result, the stated figure for 1914 is a very conservative estimate based on figures for the largest unions only.

⁴ *WDP*, 3 November 1919; Whitfield, 'Trade Unionism in Bristol', p. 81: Again, this is a conservative estimate pulled from a variety of sources.

⁵ NLRC AR, 1915, BL GRC 08139.CCC.2; NTC AR, 1915, NRO 1977/4/NTC3; *NM*, 7 November 1919: Membership of the two NUBSO branches alone increased by 45% between August 1914 and August 1918. NUBSO MR, August 1914, MRC 547/P/1/30; NUBSO MR, August 1918, MRC 547/P/1/34.

⁶ Tanner, 'Elections, Statistics, and the Rise of the Labour Party', p. 906; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 433; Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, pp. 24; 73: In London alone, the number of Labour councillors increased from 48 in 1912 to 557 in 1919.

⁷ The Liberal party won 272 seats in December 1910 and 115 in 1922. In the latter contest, the party was divided between the 'Asquithian' Liberals and the 'National Liberals' under the leadership of David Lloyd George.

Northampton, like other constituencies, had finally lost their long-held status as strongholds of Liberalism.⁸

Scholars have offered a number of potential explanations for the post-war rise of the Labour party.⁹ While the post-war era falls outside the scope of this study, it is reasonable to suggest that historians who wish to explain the interwar developments in progressive politics and ideology should not only focus their attention on events during the First World War and its immediate aftermath. After all, many of the leading Labour personalities in the 1920s and beyond, including James Ramsay Macdonald, Philip Snowden, and Arthur Henderson, all served their political and industrial apprenticeships in late nineteenth-century progressive politics. Furthermore, many of these politicians, not to mention activists at a local level, had spent their formative political years in organisations such as the ILP and the SDF, which had been established in the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁰ This was certainly the case in Bristol and Northampton, where, during the interwar period, many of the activists discussed throughout this study went on to become municipal councillors, aldermen and, in some cases, Members of Parliament.¹¹ While the war years certainly had a profound influence on realigning progressive politics, the experiences faced by labour activists in the years prior to this can still tell us a great deal about the tone of labour politics in the interwar period.

To understand the post-war realignment of progressive politics, therefore, it is vital that historians do not ignore the early history and the immediate pre-history of the Labour party. This study also suggests that it may be useful to extend the chronology back further to at least the late 1860s. Of course, there were substantial political, industrial, and cultural changes in Britain between 1867 and 1918. Over this

⁸ At the 1923 general election, the Labour party won 191 seats as opposed to the Liberals' 158. Although Labour lost 40 seats at the 1924 election, the Liberals lost 118. For Ross McKibbin, this defeat represented the elimination of the Liberal party as a competitor for the progressive vote. Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, pp. 57-58; McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. 121. Also, see Appendix.

⁹ For examples, see G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1997), p. 22; Cole, *British Working Class Politics*, p. 9; McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. 243; Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, p. 5; Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 442.

¹⁰ In the 1880s and 1890s, Macdonald was variously a member of the SDF, the Fabian Society, the London Trades' Council, and the ILP. Philip Snowden converted to socialism in the early 1890s and left the Liberal party to join the ILP. Until the mid-1890s, Henderson was also a member the Liberal party but joined the LRC on its formation in 1900. H. Tracey (ed.), *The Book of the Labour Party: Its History, Growth, Policy, and Leaders, Volume III* (London, 1925), pp. 127-128; 153; 168.

¹¹ In Bristol, John Curle, A. A. Senington and John James Milton went on to hold the position of Lord Mayor, while Dan Irving, John O'Grady, Walter Ayles and Ernest Bevin became Labour MPs. In Northampton, Alfred Slinn became an alderman, Edward Poulton served on the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, and Frederick Roberts became MP for West Bromwich and Minister of Pensions in the first Labour government.

period, Britain transformed from a predominantly rural country into an overwhelmingly urban one.¹² A mass political culture emerged with the expansion of the franchise in 1867, 1884, and 1918.¹³ From fighting for their survival in the 1870s, trade unions became a representative and established part of political and industrial life.¹⁴ The emergence of a national Labour party slowly eroded the traditional two party system and laid the foundations for the demise of the once dominant Liberal party. Women's role at the workplace changed considerably during this period, as did their involvement in politics and the trade union movement.¹⁵ In a number of regards, Britain in 1918 was not the Britain of 1867.

Nevertheless, in a range of English constituencies, the dominant progressive forces in the interwar period could all trace their roots back to the mid-to-late Victorian period. This was the case for the Labour parties in Bristol and Northampton, whose political and ideological foundations had been laid by working-class radical activists in the 1860s and 1870s. In these constituencies, working-class radicals provided their labour successors with a political language, a distinct way of understanding the social order, and a firm set of ideological principles. As a consequence, in their verbal and written discourse, labour activists continued to draw upon the old radical notions of fairness, justice, and independence. They provided inclusive terms such as 'the people' and 'the masses' with narrow meanings by interchanging with terms such as 'the working classes' or 'the workers'. While the First World War slightly changed their perception of who was and who was not an authentic member of the working class, labour activists refused to entirely abandon the restrictive assumptions about gender, place, nationality, and work that they had inherited from their working-class radical predecessors.

They also embraced working-class radicals' conciliatory view of the social order. In this view, society was composed of distinct classes - working, middle and upper, or, when they discussed industrial relations, capital and labour - which had their own particular interests.¹⁶ They saw themselves as members of and spokespersons for the working-class section of the community, and believed that, through their various activities, they would help to further the interests of this class. As a way to resolve the class imbalances in political and industrial life, they favoured

¹² Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, pp. 41-43.

¹³ Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 164; 183.

¹⁵ Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 233-240.

¹⁶ Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 20; 111.

trade unionism and increased political representation for labour. They also placed a strong emphasis on the unique values and experiences of the male, British, and urban worker. However, while they acknowledged class distinctions, they rejected class conflict. Both working-class radical and labour activists distanced themselves from the theory of the class war and frequently denied accusations from their political rivals that they wished to stir up class hatred. They justified the class-inflected tone of their discourse and demands by arguing that it was necessary due to existing political and economic inequalities in society. While they did not deny the right of other classes to a proportionate share of political representation, they believed that class politics would help to rebalance the social order and make political institutions more representative of society as a whole. Furthermore, in the industrial sphere, they favoured negotiation over strike action, which they deemed as sometimes necessary but ultimately harmful.

Labour activists in Bristol and Northampton also retained the conceptual architecture of working-class radical ideology.¹⁷ While the programmatic expression of labourism underwent a marked change from the mid-1880s onwards, its intellectual framework remained almost identical to that of working-class radicalism. A commitment to the concept of democracy, for example, led both working-class radical and labour activists to demand franchise reform and increased labour representation. Their reverence for the English constitution, or, more particularly, their democratic interpretation of the constitution, led them to defend and work through nominally democratic institutions while seeking to improve their representative character. As they saw the constitution as endowing all classes with certain political and industrial rights, they worked strenuously to assist the working class in achieving, say, their right to political representation and their right to form trade unions. Similarly, they persistently sought to defend the liberty of individuals, such as in the Bradlaugh case in the 1880s, and of the trade unions, especially during the First World War. The concepts of democracy, constitutionalism, rights, and liberty, which had formed the core of working-class radical ideology in the 1860s and 1870s, remained at the core of labourism until at least 1918.

Despite witnessing numerous political and socio-structural changes over a period of nearly fifty years, labour activists in Bristol and Northampton thus demonstrated a high degree of commitment to old languages, identities, and

¹⁷ Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 77-82.

ideological concepts. Establishing a connection between the mid-Victorian working-class radical tradition and later labour politics offers fresh insights into the process of political and ideological change in a number of English constituencies. Firstly, acknowledging the existence of a decidedly working-class radical tradition helps us to understand a number of subsequent developments in popular politics without having to account for major discontinuities. For traditional scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm, the continuous development of the modern British labour movement only commenced again after the socialist revival and the outbreak of new unionism in the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁸ In this view, the Labour party was the outcome of attitudinal and industrial changes that had led to a more assertive, independent, and class-conscious working class. However, in Bristol and Northampton, the socialist revival and the outbreak of new unionism only served to revalidate pre-existing ideas about class, politics and society. If further research confirms that labour politics was merely an outgrowth of older political traditions, then there will be less need to search for turning points or junctures in the late Victorian period to explain the emergence of the Labour party.

Secondly, recognising the dynamism and assertiveness of the working-class radical tradition makes it easier to explain some of the tensions that continued to characterise progressive politics in England before 1918. In focusing on the popular radical tradition, liberal revisionist historians have presented a largely optimistic picture of progressive politics that has tended to ignore the important differences between, say, radicals and liberals. As scholars such as Anthony Taylor and Jon Lawrence have shown, the radical-liberal relationship was far from unproblematic in the post-Chartist era.¹⁹ This study, though, goes further by suggesting that there were significant tensions *within* radical politics that, very often, were based on contrasting views of class, society, and ideology. In the examples considered throughout this study, there were marked differences between middle-class radicals, who tended to articulate a populist and inclusive vision of the social order, and working-class radicals, who were far more likely to add a class inflection to their

¹⁸ Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, p. 182. See also Kirk, *Change, continuity and class*, p. 156; Chamberlain, 'The Growth of Support for the Labour Party in Britain', p. 481; Childs, 'Labour Grows Up', p. 142.

¹⁹ For examples, see Lawrence, *Speaking for the people*, pp. 170-172; Lawrence, 'The dynamics of urban politics', p. 94; Taylor, "'Commons-Stealers'", "Land-Grabbers" and "Jerry-Builders'", pp. 383-407; Taylor, 'Reynolds's Newspaper, Opposition to Monarchy and the Radical Anti-Jubilee', pp. 318-337; Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*; Finn, *After Chartism*, pp. 144; 191; 203; Owen, 'An inexplicable constituency?', pp. 107-128.

political and industrial demands. Furthermore, while radicals of all classes often agreed on a range of political questions, working-class radicals tended to prioritise and place a stronger emphasis on certain issues, such as labour representation, that received far less attention from their middle-class allies.

If we see labour politics in Bristol and Northampton as a continuation of a decidedly working-class radical tradition, then it becomes easier to understand the class-based character and tone of local labour politics, as well as the mutual suspicion that characterised the relations between labour activists and local Liberal associations, in the early twentieth century. Before 1885, working-class radicals in these constituencies had been sympathetic to the broad historical mission of liberalism, the Liberal party, and certain Liberal personalities. However, they grew frustrated at the unrepresentative nature of local Liberal associations and the political moderation of their middle- and upper-class leaders. They felt that these leaders ignored the concerns of the working classes, who, they argued, formed the overwhelming majority of the broadly conceived Liberal party. While their strategies for solving these problems certainly differed, working-class radicals in both Bristol and Northampton considered local Liberal parties to be unresponsive to the legitimate demands of the working classes and, more specifically, those of the trade union movement. In short, class served to inform the views and the political strategies of working-class radical activists.

Early labour politics in Bristol and Northampton was based firmly on this sense of frustration and social exclusion. Although, by the end of the 1880s, they had largely abandoned the 'radical' moniker, labour activists still criticised local Liberal associations for failing to fully accommodate the demands of the 'labour party', by which they meant the trade union movement and the spokespersons of the working class. They continued to object to the unrepresentative nature of the Liberal leadership, the middle-class domination of political representation, and the perceived prioritisation of middle-class demands. Again, labour activists in Bristol and Northampton pursued contrasting strategies towards the Liberal party. In Bristol, this sense of frustration manifested itself in independent labour organisations that sought to challenge the 'conservative' Liberal Association from without.²⁰ In Northampton, on the other hand, the presence of a largely sympathetic body of middle-class radicals in the Liberal and Radical Union convinced labour

²⁰ Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party*, p. 291.

activists that the 'labour party' could achieve at least some of its goals by working through rather than against this organisation. Still, despite these differences, labour politics in both constituencies was largely defined, until the First World War at least, by a strong sense of disappointment and anger towards the Liberal party for failing to fulfil what labour activists considered to be its historic objectives.

Finally, identifying working-class radicalism and labourism as distinctive ideologies in their own right has important implications for our understanding of ideological change in modern Britain. Often, historians have tended to regard radicalism and labourism as variants of other ideologies such as liberalism and socialism. On other occasions, historians have spoken of labourism in pejorative terms or have considered it to be a set of assumptions rather than a coherent ideology.²¹ This study, however, suggests that working-class radicalism and labourism had their own conceptual frameworks that differed from those of other progressive ideologies. By using Michael Freeden's conceptual approach to ideology as a guide, it has suggested that these ideologies were essentially composed of the same core and adjacent concepts, including democracy, constitutionalism, rights, liberty, class, and community. As the concept of the state emerged as a peripheral concept in working-class radical ideology during the 1880s, the term 'labour' also began to replace 'radical' in local political discourse. For this reason, and for the sake of clarity, this study used the term 'labourism' to describe the dominant ideology of labour activists from this point onwards. Yet, while the concept of the state gradually changed the meaning of labourism's core and adjacent concepts, this development did not represent a significant ideological departure. Essentially, labourism was, in its underlying conceptual framework, working-class radicalism in a new guise.

Restoring working-class radicalism and labourism to their rightful place in the ideological canon of progressive thought adds a new dimension to the debates about continuity and change in pre-1918 Britain. More specifically, it suggests that discursive, programmatic, and organisational changes in late Victorian and Edwardian progressive politics largely obscured the resilience of old conceptual frameworks. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, many former radicals began to describe themselves as labour or socialist activists. They helped to establish a variety of new organisations, including the ILP, the SDF, and, in 1900, the Labour

²¹ For a discussion of these perspectives, see Davies, 'Labourism' and the New Left', pp. 39-56. Michael Freeden considers labourism to be a 'mutation' of other progressive ideologies. M. Freeden, 'The Stranger at the Feast: Ideology and Public Policy in Twentieth Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1/1 (1990), p. 11.

Representation Committee. During the same period, their political programmes became more collectivist in tone as they began to include a range of statist demands that would have been considered impracticable just decades earlier.

However, the conceptual way of thinking that had informed the tradition from which these new organisations and new programmes had emerged remained largely intact. Very often, labour activists at a local level established new organisations to achieve objectives, such as labour representation, which old organisations had proven themselves incapable of fulfilling. Like their working-class radical predecessors, they remained fully committed to rebalancing the political and social order in a more equitable way. They too sought to make nominally democratic institutions, such as Parliament, more representative of Britain's class-divided society. They too exhibited a certain amount of reverence for the English constitution, which, they believed, granted to all classes certain rights and liberties. They too wished to achieve their objectives through entirely peaceful and legal means. While, from the mid-1880s onwards, they gradually embraced the idea of utilising the state apparatus, they primarily saw state intervention as a way to protect and extend the old radical notion of the rights of labour. Old aged pensions, a system of national insurance, the state employment of labour, and the nationalisation of selected industries would, they hoped, help workers attain the rights that had old strategies, such as individual effort, had failed to accomplish. For labour activists in Bristol and Northampton, new strategies, programmes, and organisations were simply new vehicles through which they could achieve old objectives.

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Appendix

Parliamentary Election Results in Bristol and Northampton, 1868-1929

Bristol (two seats; dissolved 1885)

Year	Candidate	Party	Votes
1868 (b)	J. W. Miles	Conservative	5,173
1868 (b)	S. Morley	Liberal	4,977
1868	H. F. Berkeley	Liberal	8,759
1868	S. Morley	Liberal	8,714
1868	J. W. Miles	Conservative	6,694
1870 (b)	E. S. Robinson	Liberal	7,882
1870 (b)	S. V. Hare	Conservative	7,062
1870 (b2)	K. D. Hodgson	Liberal	7,816
1870 (b2)	S. V. Hare	Conservative	7,238
1874	K. D. Hodgson	Liberal	8,888
1874	S. Morley	Liberal	8,732
1874	S. V. Hare	Conservative	8,552
1874	G.H. Chambers	Conservative	7,626
1878 (b)	L. Fry	Liberal	9,342
1878 (b)	Sir I. Guest	Conservative	7,795
1880	S. Morley	Liberal	10,704
1880	L. Fry	Liberal	10,070
1880	Sir I. Guest	Conservative	9,395
1880	E. S. Robinson	Independent Liberal	4,100

Bristol East (created 1885)

Year	Candidate	Party	Votes
1885	H. Cossham	Liberal	4,647
1885	J. Bissell	Conservative	2,383
1886	H. Cossham	Liberal	3,672
1886	J. Inskip	Conservative	1,936
1890 (b)	J. D. Weston	Liberal	4,775
1890 (b)	J. Inskip	Conservative	1,900
1890 (b)	J.H. Wilson	Labour	602
1892	J. D. Weston	Liberal	Unopposed
1895 (b)	W. H. Wills	Liberal	3,740
1895 (b)	H. H. Gore	ILP	3,608
1895	W. H. Wills	Liberal	4,129
1895	S. Hobson	ILP	1,874

1900	C. Hobhouse	Liberal	4,979
1900	R. A. Sanders	Conservative	3,848
1906	C. Hobhouse	Liberal	7,935
1906	T. Johnston	Conservative	3,129
1910 Jan	C. Hobhouse	Liberal	6,804
1910 Jan	T. H. Batten	Conservative	4,033
1910 Jan	F. Sheppard	Labour	2,255
1910 Dec	C. Hobhouse	Liberal	7,229
1910 Dec	P. Hannon	Conservative	4,263
1911 (b)	C. Hobhouse	Liberal	4,913
1911 (b)	W. Moore	Independent	2,913
1918	G. B. Britton	Liberal	9,434
1918	L. Bateman	Labour	8,135
1918	C. Hobhouse	Liberal	1,447
1922	H. Morris	National Liberal	13,910
1922	L. Bateman	Labour	13,759
1923	W. J. Baker	Labour	14,828
1923	H. Morris	Liberal	12,788
1924	W. J. Baker	Labour	16,920
1924	H. Maggs	Liberal	12,143
1929	W. J. Baker	Labour	24,197
1929	C. Gordon-Spencer	Liberal	12,576

Bristol North (created 1885)

Year	Candidate	Party	Votes
1885	L. Fry	Liberal	4,110
1885	E. Colston	Conservative	3,046
1886	L. Fry	Liberal Unionist	3,587
1886	A. Carpenter	Liberal	2,737
1892	C. Townsend	Liberal	4,409
1892	L. Fry	Liberal Unionist	4,064
1895	L. Fry	Liberal Unionist	4,702
1895	C. Townsend	Liberal	4,464
1900	F. Wills	Liberal Unionist	4,936
1900	C. Smith	Liberal	4,182
1906	A. Birrell	Liberal	6,953
1906	J. Foote	Conservative	4,011
1910 Jan	A. Birrell	Liberal	6,805
1910 Jan	M. Woods	Conservative	5,459
1910 Dec	A. Birrell	Liberal	6,410
1910 Dec	L. Magnus	Conservative	5,084
1918	E. S. Gange	Liberal	11,400

1918	J. Kaylor	Labour	5,007
1918	E. W. Petter	Nat P	2,520
1922	C. Guest	National Liberal	17,495
1922	W. Ayles	Labour	9,567
1923	W. Ayles	Labour	10,432
1923	C. Guest	Liberal	8,770
1923	E. W. Petter	Conservative	8,643
1924	F. E. Guest	Liberal	17,799
1924	W. Ayles	Labour	12,319
1929	W. Ayles	Labour	18,619
1929	F. E. Guest	Liberal	12,932
1929	J. Skelton	Independent Liberal	6,713

Bristol South (created 1885)

Year	Candidate	Party	Votes
1885	J. D. Weston	Liberal	4,217
1885	Col. Hill	Conservative	4,121
1886	Col. Hill	Conservative	4,447
1886	J. D. Weston	Liberal	3,423
1892	Col. Hill	Conservative	4,990
1892	W. H. Wills	Liberal	4,442
1895	Col. Hill	Conservative	5,190
1895	O. C. Power	Liberal	4,431
1900	W. H. Long	Conservative	5,470
1900	W. H. Davies	Liberal	4,859
1906	W. H. Davies	Liberal	7,964
1906	W. H. Long	Conservative	5,272
1910 Jan	W. H. Davies	Liberal	7,281
1910 Jan	H. W. Chatterton	Conservative	7,010
1910 Dec	W. H. Davies	Liberal	6,895
1910 Dec	J. T. Francombe	Conservative	6,757
1918	W. H. Davies	Liberal	13,761
1918	T. C. Lewis	Labour	6,409
1922	W. B. Rees	National Liberal	16,199
1922	D. J. Vaughan	Labour	12,650
1923	W. B. Rees	Liberal	15,235
1923	D. J. Vaughan	Labour	13,701
1924	W. B. Rees	Liberal	16,722
1924	D. J. Vaughan	Labour	15,702
1929	A. G. Walkden	Labour	23,591
1929	W. B. Rees	Liberal	18,194

Bristol West (created 1885)

Year	Candidate	Party	Votes
1885	M. Hicks-Beach	Conservative	3,876
1885	B. Nixon	Liberal	2,463
1886	M. Hicks-Beach	Conservative	3,819
1886	J. Judd	Liberal	1,801
1892	M. Hicks-Beach	Conservative	Unopposed
1895	M. Hicks-Beach	Conservative	3,815
1895	H. Lawless	Liberal	1,842
1900	M. Hicks-Beach	Conservative	Unopposed
1906	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	4,267
1906	T. J. Lennard	Liberal	3,902
1910 Jan	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	5,159
1910 Jan	W. Saise	Liberal	3,881
1910 Dec	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	4,871
1910 Dec	J. W. Stevens	Liberal	3,595
1918	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	Unopposed
1921 (b)	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	Unopposed
1922	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	18,124
1922	F. W. Raffety	Liberal	11,100
1923	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	Unopposed
1924	G. A. Gibbs	Conservative	23,574
1924	M. Giles	Labour	6,276
1929	C. T. Culverwell	Conservative	25,416
1929	C. Annesley	Labour	11,961
1929	W. N. Marcy	Liberal	9,909

Bristol Central (created 1918)

Year	Candidate	Party	Votes
1918	T. W. H. Inskip	Conservative	12,232
1918	E. Bevin	Labour	7,137
1922	T. W. H. Inskip	Conservative	15,568
1922	C. B. Thomson	Labour	12,303
1923	T. W. H. Inskip	Conservative	14,386
1923	S. E. Walters	Labour	11,932
1924	T. W. H. Inskip	Conservative	17,177
1924	J. A. Lovat-Fraser	Labour	14,018
1929	J. H. Alpass	Labour	20,749
1929	T. W. H. Inskip	Conservative	16,524

Northampton (two seats until 1918)

Year	Candidate	Party	Votes
1868	C. Gilpin	Liberal	2,623
1868	Lord Henley	Liberal	2,111
1868	C. Merewether	Conservative	1,631
1868	W. Lendrick	Conservative	1,374
1868	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	1,069
1868	Dr. Lees	Radical	495
1874	P. Phipps	Conservative	2,690
1874	C. Gilpin	Liberal	2,310
1874	C. Merewether	Conservative	2,175
1874	Lord Henley	Liberal	1,796
1874	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	1,653
1874 (b)	C. Merewether	Conservative	2,171
1874 (b)	W. Fowler	Liberal	1,836
1874 (b)	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	1,766
1880	H. Labouchere	Liberal	4,158
1880	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	3,827
1880	P. Phipps	Conservative	3,152
1880	C. Merewether	Conservative	2,826
1881 (b)	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	3,437
1881 (b)	E. Corbett	Conservative	3,305
1882 (b)	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	3,796
1882 (b)	E. Corbett	Conservative	3,688
1884 (b)	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	4,032
1884 (b)	H. C. Richards	Conservative	3,664
1885	H. Labouchère	Liberal	4,845
1885	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	4,315
1885	H. C. Richards	Conservative	3,890
1886	H. Labouchère	Liberal	4,570
1886	C. Bradlaugh	Radical	4,353
1886	R. Turner	Liberal Unionist	3,850
1886	H. Lees	Conservative	3,456
1891 (b)	P. Manfield	Liberal	5,436
1891 (b)	Germaine	Conservative	3,723
1892	H. Labouchère	Liberal	5,439
1892	P. Manfield	Liberal	5,162
1892	Richards	Conservative	3,651
1892	Drucker	Conservative	3,235
1895	H. Labouchère	Liberal	4,883
1895	C. Drucker	Conservative	3,820
1895	E. Harford	Lib-Lab	3,703
1895	Jacobs	Conservative	3,394
1895	Jones	SDF	1,216

1895	J. Robertson	Independent Liberal	1,131
1900	H. Labouchère	Liberal	5,281
1900	J. Shipman	Liberal	5,437
1900	R. Orlebar	Conservative	4,481
1900	H. Randall	Conservative	4,121
1906	H. Paul	Liberal	4,472
1906	J. Shipman	Liberal	4,236
1906	R. Orlebar	Conservative	4,061
1906	F. Barnes	Conservative	3,987
1906	J. Williams	SDF	2,549
1906	J. Gribble	SDF	2,461
1910 Jan	H. Lees-Smith	Liberal	5,398
1910 Jan	C. McCurdy	Liberal	5,289
1910 Jan	R. Orlebar	Conservative	4,569
1910 Jan	F. Barnes	Conservative	4,464
1910 Jan	J. Gribble	SDP	1,792
1910 Jan	H. Quelch	SDP	1,697
1910 Dec	H. Lees-Smith	Liberal	6,179
1910 Dec	C. McCurdy	Liberal	6,025
1910 Dec	F. C. Parker	Conservative	4,885
1910 Dec	J. V. Collier	Conservative	4,550
1918	C. McCurdy	Coalition Liberal	18,010
1918	W. Halls	Labour	10,735
1920 (b)	C. McCurdy	Coalition Liberal	16,650
1920 (b)	M. Bondfield	Labour	13,279
1922	C. McCurdy	National Liberal	19,974
1922	M. Bondfield	Labour	14,493
1922	H. Vivian	Independent Liberal	3,753
1923	M. Bondfield	Labour	15,556
1923	J. V. Collier	Conservative	11,520
1923	C. McCurdy	Liberal	11,342
1924	A. Holland	Conservative	16,097
1924	M. Bondfield	Labour	15,046
1924	J. Manfield	Liberal	9,436
1928 (b)	C. L. Malone	Labour	15,173
1928 (b)	A. Renton	Conservative	14,616
1928 (b)	S. Morgan	Liberal	9,584
1928 (b)	E. Hailwood	Independent Conservative	1,093
1929	C. L. Malone	Labour	22,356
1929	A. Renton	Conservative	20,177
1929	A. Schilizzi	Liberal	11,054