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Authority and Change in the Coalfields

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Miners who went on strike in 1984 were clear about one thing. They knew that McGregor was out to close collieries and that only industrial action would prevent the 'hit list' from taking rapid effect. For many of them the experience of 1972 and 1974 was an important one. To those who had gone through it, the 1972 dispute seemed to represent a turning point in the history of the union and the coal industry. In the densely concentrated mining communities of the North of England, South Wales and Scotland that strike had become firmly established in the popular memory. Then, people will tell you, "the old men said we couldn't win; that no strike could win in the coal industry. They all remembered 1926 you see. But we did win". In 1984 there were fewer harbingers of doom, instead there was a grimness, a sense of having 'our backs to the wall'. 'It's now or never'; 'it's them or us'; 'it's a fight to the death'. These were the phrases repeated in those early days. It became apparent, quite quickly, that the grimness reflected a reality – the 1984 dispute was to be very different from anything that had gone before.

POWER AND MOTIVATION

The dispute was rooted in what has been called the peripheral coalfields. Scotland, Wales, Kent and the North East all stuck solidly. True, they were joined (some would say 'led') by the major 'central block' coalfield of Yorkshire but this does not detract from the fact that the dispute centred upon the disadvantaged regions of mainland Britain. To some extent it was fuelled by this regional sense of outrage. It was noticeable that notions of 'the English' and of 'the South' gained currency as the dispute progressed. The Thatcher government inflamed this understanding. Her deeply autocratic (bossy) style, combined with a narrowingly provincial grasp of politics to create a strong impression of a power which lacked both compassion and understanding. As one man put it:

> OK, so she has won the Election and if they're in Government for five or ten years – alright. I can accept that. But they shouldn't dictate. And that's what she's doing. She is dictating and no government should do that.

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The resentment being expressed here was commented on, during the dispute by the philosopher of orthodox English Toryism, Enoch Powell. For him, the dispute in the coalfields represented a fundamental breakdown in the authority of the state. For:

> Beneath the glossy conventional surface of tolerated opinion and authorised vocabulary, the absence of real communication permits and encourages the growth of resentment. Resentment at the apparently wilful blindness of those in authority, resentment at the apparently unrecognised destination toward which those living under authority are being inextricably borne[1].

In the striking coalfields, high rates of unemployment, especially among the young, combined with the fear of hastening job losses to produce a deep sense of injustice. In organising around this, through their trade union, they experienced real problems.

To begin with their numbers had dwindled vitally – even since 1972. Compared with 1926 (when well over a hundred thousand miners worked in the coalfields of Scotland, South Wales and the North East) the changes were dramatic indeed. Even in 1972, the coalfields were dominated by mining and miners to the extent that with a withdrawal of labour there was an immediate sense of power – of having an impact. In South Wales the miners from the Maerdy Colliery wear a badge with the slogan: "the last pit in the Rhondda". It is a statement which has a ring of defiance, but carries with it a sense of tragedy. Also it has the suggestion of powerlessness. This problem of numbers, is a problem which relates to the decline (and restructuring) of the coal industry. Further, it had its impact upon the conduct of the dispute. One young man who had been a teenager in 1972 said this in the Summer of 1984:

> When we came out on strike I thought 'Great: We're going to put up a fight at last'. I'd heard all the stories about 1972 and everything that happened then. But this strike hasn't been anything like I expected. It's been really disappointing. It has. We've stopped nothing.

In 1972 miners sealed off the movement of coal and made an effective intervention into the use of substitute fuels. Saltley Gates was but one event in this process. In the North East picketing, combined with unsolicited acts of solidarity, was a potent weapon. Its most noticeable impact was on Teesside where the major chemical and steel industries were decisively affected. Not so in 1984, and when reflecting on the change men point to a number of factors. The design of factories was one thing which had altered:

> I would say that the factories are different now than in 1972. There wasn't really any picketing in 1974 but in 1972 the factories and the steel works were quite easy to picket. Its a lot different now. The new factories have got wide gates and the lorries can tear through them. It makes it impossible to picket without a hell of a lot of men.

This problem was accentuated on Teesside. The new British Steel Corporation complex contained its own port with bulk handling facilities which was impossible to picket without trespassing into the complex itself:

> Its impossible down there. With the new road system and there's that many gates. It would have to be a military operation to shut down that place.

Similar comments were made by men who attempted to picket the oil-fired power station at Fawley:

> It's all part of this great big petro-chemical complex, with this perimeter fence around it. You can stand at the main gate, but you don't know if you're picketing a chemical worker or a docker or a power worker. Its hopeless really.

Aspects of architecture, and of a redesigned transport system, reflect a political state where a great strategic sense has been applied to the organisation and distribution of production.

In assessing this, lodge officials and active pickets regularly assessed the kind of organisation which would be necessary to develop the picketing effectively. In Durham these discussions were endless in those decisive, long summer months. With an inevitability, they would focus upon the problem of 'plastic (or cardboard) pickets'. As the weeks passed the question of how to motivate 'the plastic' became a central theme in all their talk about strategy. What these discussions hinged upon was this: while most of the men in the coalfield supported the strike, only a minority (perhaps ten per cent) would turn up regularly for picketing. Many men would not turn out because they were afraid, or because their wives were afraid, that they would be injured or arrested. Of those who did turn out, only a minority were prepared to 'do the business'.

These are important points, and they relate to the reference made earlier to the need for a 'military operation'. There was no such operation, and in the face of the new power relations, very few miners seemed prepared to take the risks that such a confrontation would involve. One man, reflecting upon his experience at Orgreave, recounts how:

> I don't think anyone has fully realised just how frightened a lot of people were. It certainly frightened the hell out of me. It frightened a lot of men to the point that they didn't want to go picketing again – it did mind; because it was very, very frightening.

Another story that was repeated often tells how:

> Arthur came up with his megaphone telling us to get down there in the front line and of course we followed him down proud as punch . . . but these Yorkshire lads I'll never forget it . . . 'We're not going down there Arthur; its fucking suicide down there'. Well if Arthur Scargill can't motivate men to take on the police what chance have we got?

THE STATE

Not all situations were as intense or as frightening as Orgreave but, in the daily round of picketing in the North East, it became clear that while men were prepared to picket peacefully, and a number of them would put their hearts into a ritual shove, few (except under the most intense of provocations) were ready for a pitched battle. Increasingly this became the case as one arrest followed another. This reluctance is understandable, and it relates, in part, to the moral aprobrium associated with arrest, and "getting into trouble" in these mining communities. One man, who was being harrassed systematically by the CID put it like this:

> I've told our lass I've done nothing wrong but she won't believe me. As she sees it if the police are coming to the door I must have done something. They came late at night so its impossible to say its the insurance man or something. They do that deliberate. Its clear its them like, and our lass feels that I must be in some sort of trouble. She doesn't like the police, and she says she'll stand by me and that, but she still thinks I must have done wrong, and I haven't.

Another man commented philosophically:

> You see we've been brought up to think that if you're arrested and you go to jail you've done wrong. Its a stigma in this area. We've got to learn to accept now that people are being arrested and put in jail for doing the right thing. But it's a difficult thing to get across to people.

To some extent this was achieved. But the difficulty of the task stemmed from the fact that it cut against the grain of the established political and moral culture of the working class in the coalfield areas. It had its impact in the unsuccessful ballot to levy fifty pence for the men sacked by the Board. "A lot of people think that they are hooligans and they deserve what they get. I've heard lodge officials say that!" In South Wales, efforts to raise support for a general amnesty for all jailed miners have proved equally difficult and foundered because the families of the men jailed for murder felt strongly that they did wrong. In their view a life sentence for murder was excessive but a pardon would be wrong. They consider that punishment for manslaughter most appropriate.

These feelings also worked in an oppositional way during the dispute. In Sunderland the mothers of strikers arrested on picket lines insisted that lawyers refused the offer of "bind overs". They argued that their sons had been brought up decently and had done no wrong; their insistence achieve acquittals. This also applied to the men on the picket lines. Many of them tell how before the dispute they had no criticisms of the police; how in times of trouble they would help them. Even as the dispute progressed, men talked of how:

> The coppers were pushing us all over the place and how this one twisted and fell down. I moved over and helped him to his feet! I don't think I'd do it now like, but that's what I did.

To these people the behaviour of the police during the dispute was a deeply shocking experience. This was so from the earliest days of the dispute first in Nottingham, then on the motorways and then at the rally in Sheffield on 19 April. The talk was consistently of 'our rights', of unprovoked assault, of wrongful arrest. Men talked of policemen surrounding their buses and wiping their noses with ten pound notes, while others flicked wads of fivers in front of their faces. It is clear that those miners experienced these events as deeply humiliating:

> That disgusted me. I can't say it clearer than that. I was just totally disgusted at policemen doing things like that. To see a policeman who has earned all that money (and he's earned it off us) just flaunting it in our faces. As if to say: "look at all the money I'm making off your stupid strike". It just sickened me'.

Also it is clear that for many it involved a change in attitude which was quite decisive:

> When this strike first started I thought they had a bad job. Now I think they're the lowest of the low. Just scum really. Before this strike if I saw a policeman getting worked over I'd help him. Now I wouldn't. I'd probably join in! And most of the lads feel the same.

In November 1984 the Home Secretary spoke of how:

> When the strike is over, we will have to consider very carefully, exactly how we can repair the damage that has occurred.[2]

It is clear here that the repair work would have to be of a fundamental kind. One man, a striking miner and a magistrate, gave no credence to the idea of such repair work:

> We have to have laws and the law has to be upheld, but if the police are breaking the law – which they are – they should be as responsible as everyone else

He continued:

> What was the most worrying thing about all of this was the power of the police. That was the frightening part of it. It was clear that they felt that they could do what they wanted. That they could do as they liked really. I honestly think we're moving towards a police state in this country.

Such views were bolstered by occasional discussions on the picket lines, in police vans and police stations. Through the process of questioning ("Did You Vote for Scargill?"; "What would you do if you could only vote Conservative or Communist?" etc.) it became clear that the police force had been deeply politicised by the dispute and had an involvement in it which extended beyond the remit of 'community' policing. This was made most clear in an account of a discussion where the policeman asked the picket how much he was getting. The man replied that he was getting £2 a day for picketing away from his own pit. To which the policeman responded with details of his overtime payment. "Ah", said the striker, "but that's dependent upon this Government being in power; what will happen to you when the next Government comes in?" "We are the next Government" came the reply.

Stories like this, linked with direct experience, to create a powerful view amongst the striking miners – certainly amongst those active in the dispute – of an uncontrolled police power. "But", as one of them put it, "after this is all over we will know it, and the blacks will know it, but no one else will know what is happening in this country".

The reference to 'blacks' is an important one. In 1981, during the riots that spilled out of Toxteth in Liverpool to many of our major cities, the coalfields were quiet. In Durham, in that July, there was a rumour that the Miners' Gala would be the occasion for a riot in the North East. No miner took the prospect seriously. While sympathetic to the plight of the urban unemployed in 1981 there was little sympathy on the coalfields for riot as a form of political protest. Equally in 1984, while in dispute – and in spite of the more excessive fantasising of the Home Secretary – what struck the independent observer most strongly was not so much the violence, but the *restraint* of pickets. Given

the situation – a year-long strike which many felt to be about the continuation of lives as they knew it – this is the surprise. To focus on the occasional fusillade of stones or burning barricades is to miss the significant fact that the coalfields in 1984/5 never kicked over the traces of lawlessness in a way comparable with the riots in Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side and Handsworth.

There is good reason for this. Miners historically, to an extent far beyond any other groups in the working class, have progressed their interests through the state. Check-weighmen, guaranteed by Act of Parliament, preceded the recognition of the union and the statutory regulation of the industry continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1984, the miners were in dispute over the *Plan For Coal*, made between the National Union of Mineworkers, the National Coal Board and the government. As a group, miners are not the dispossessed. Generally they experience none of the feelings of being outside "politics" and beyond the state which affects the consciousness of the urban poor.[3] While on strike, however, the miners were treated like the black communities and the poor. For they became dependent upon welfare and regulated by the oppressive super-intendence of the police. To say that they didn't like it is an understatement. Generalisations about their interpretation of this, however, and its political significance, are less certain.

WORK, COMMUNITY AND POLITICS

The mining industry was nationalised in 1947, and in the post-war period mining communities established for themselves a central place within the politics of the new welfare state. It was a one-fuel economy and in it coal production was at a premium. Here too, through reconstruction, the middle classes seemed more receptive to the kind of comments Orwell made in 1937:

> You could quite easily drive a car right across the North of England and never once remember that hundreds of feet below the road you are on, the miners are hacking out coal. Yet in a sense it is the miners who are driving your car forward. Their lamp-lit world down there is necessary to the day light world above as the root is to the flower.[4]

Such sentiments often became public, and especially in times of disaster. In 1951, on the occasion of a major loss of life at Easington Colliery, the manager of the pit, a Mr T Hopkins said:

> When we pick up the threads of our life and work again and there may be occasions when – as manager – I have to criticise some of my men, but always at the back of my mind there will be the memory of the way they stood beside me during the days we have just gone through.

These comments were reproduced in the National Coal Board journal, *Coal*, and its editor added that behind such statements there lay:

> a century and a half of turbulent struggle, and a tradition which is born anew whenever the banner is unfurled.[5]

At nearby Murton, a mine disaster occurred in 1942 and at the ceremony which took place forty years later the industrial chaplain for the coal industry

spoke to a church filled with miners, their families and their representatives. "Mining", he said:

> is an industry of great tragedy and sadness. But it is an industry of tremendous pride and great culture. It is a magnificent industry.

What these accounts reveal are the particular set of authority relations which operate within mining and which, to an important extent, distinguish it from other branches of industry. It was these sets of relationships, and the images which derive from them, which were torn asunder in 1984. As the mine management collaborated openly with the police force to break the strike, many lodge officials were deeply shaken. "It's about respect, really", said one, "we've always consulted about things but that's all over now". This sense of moral outrage – and near disbelief – occurred many times during the dispute and no more so than at Easington Colliery in February 1985. Here, in a village near solid in its support of the strike, miners, their wives and families had picketed the gates of the pit, and the houses of the men who scabbed:

> It's a terrible thing to do. We are all solid; together, all of us in the community. It's just greed and selfishness really.

What outraged people more than this, however, was the description of the village in the local press as the Beirut of the North East. That same solidarity which received praise and respect in times of disaster, in a time of strife, turned into its opposite.

A similar, if more complex process, accompanied the return to work in March 1985. Men were clear that they, "wouldn't work with scabs", and that underground the moral solidarity of the strike would be preserved in defiance of the authority of the Coal Board. At work, however, with the Coal Board's hard line approach installed, a new regime operated. One man in Durham put it like this:

> They've taken away the camaraderie of the pit. Its all gone. And without the laughing and the joking down the pit its a rotten, dirty, filthy job. The only good thing about pit work was your marras; and that's gone.

A Yorkshire miner expressed a similar view:

> I've worked in places before the pit. In factories and such like. It was all 'do this', 'do that' sort of thing. The good thing about the pit was that you could tell the gaffa to 'fuck off' and get away with it. You weren't working under the screw all the time. If its going to be like that it won't be worth having.

In these statements important questions are raised about the dispute and about the future. To some, they imply that it is time to leave the industry for good – and many thousands have taken this option since the dispute ended. When I asked one lodge secretary to describe the general view at his, massive, colliery. He replied, "let's close the bastard, so we can all be away". In the absence of closure, however, the operation of work seems likely to be very different indeed. In every coalfield there have been regular disputes since March; disputes over victimisation over bonus rates, over the non-payment of

wet money; disputes over managerial prerogatives. Everywhere people tell you, "the atmosphere is gone; its just not there".

What has been broken in the dispute is a tradition. This was a tradition built around coal and formalised in nationalisation. The National Coal Board operates as a centralised rational capitalist concern. In so doing a whole pattern of workplace relationships and forms of community involvement and support are put at risk. In assessing the significance of those changes two miners talked and disagreed. For one it was clear that:

> A hell of a lot of lads have been radicalised. A hell of a lot are asking questions about the system – about power – which they want answered. They know that we had a good go at them last year.

In the view of his friend however:

> . . . in the dispute the miners came out of their shells, they looked around and they saw what this rotten system is really like. But now they're back at work 'they've slipped right back into their shells, again. They're getting up in the morning; getting the bus; getting in that cage. They've gone back.

To some extent they are both right. Neither would argue with the enthusiasm of a young miner who said of the strike:

> If we had one of these every two or three years, people will really know how this system works.

At the moment, however, the overwhelming concern is to rebuild. Perhaps the clearest example of this comes from Durham. Without question the refusal of Neil Kinnock to speak on National Union of Mineworkers' platforms and to give a more whole-hearted support to the dispute caused great offense to many miners in the area. Certainly there was general sympathy with the resolutions from the Herrington and Murton Lodges requesting that the Labour Leader should not be invited to the 1985 Gala in the area. This sympathy saw the resolution carried both by the Executive and the Union's area council. The latter vote was narrow and all opponents to it argued in a similar vein: there was no personal liking for Kinnock but he was the leader of the Labour Party; the leader of the Party always attends the Gala as a matter of course; it would be an insult to the Party to snub him; the unity of the Party and the election of a Labour Government now should be the paramount concern of the National Union of Mineworkers. It was this view which prevailed in the lodges, and it was put most strongly in the militant Easington lodge. As one Labour Party member put it:

> I think it would be really stupid to cause a split over Kinnock. Whether we like it or not he is the leader of the party and with the way things are going in the pit we've had it. I can't see us winning anything else without a Labour Government.

This general return to the orthodoxies of the past is not really surprising. While people insisted during the dispute that, things will never be the same, these same people also talked - and almost with a longing - of normal life and of a time when, things will get back to normal. Time and again, in conversation and in moments of reflection, ideas of change and normality were juxtaposed.

While few of the people on strike were unaware of the importance of politics in shaping events, the language of politics which was used throughout the dispute tended to be a defensive one. After all, the central demand of the union was for the preservation of the status quo. This is an important point to hold against the developing images of miners as the vanguard of the working class movement in this country. The towns and villages of the coalfields stand, historically, as places of immense political and cultural stability. In these places matters of power, authority and organisation have become patterned into the texture of daily life, often to be understood as custom. Ironically, their defence of things as they are - our communities - people threatened to change things for all time - they will never be the same. The dispute was structured by this tension and politically it was never resolved. It is a contradiction which will outlive the events of 1984-5 and extend into the period of the next government, no matter what its political complexion.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 *The Guardian*, 10 November 1984.
2 *Financial Times*, 17 November 1984.
3 This of course was the source of Powell's concern. For him, the blacks as aliens, need deporting; the miners as part of the British tradition need integrating.
4 George Orwell, 'Down the Mine' in *Inside the Whale and other essays*, Penguin, 1957, p.63.
5 *Coal*, July 1951, p.11.