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# **‘All that is Solid?’ Class, Identity and the Maintenance of a Collective Orientation amongst Redundant Steel Workers**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the importance of class and collectivism to personal identity, and the role this played during a period of personal and collective crisis created by mass redundancy in the Welsh steel industry. The research findings demonstrate the importance of occupational identity to individual and collective identity formation. The apparent desire to maintain this collective identity acted as a form of resistance to the increased individualisation of the post-redundancy experience, but rather than leading to excessive particularism, it served as mechanism through which class based thinking and class identity were articulated. It is argued that the continued concern for class identity reflected efforts to avoid submergence in an existence akin to Beck’s (1992) vision of a class-free ‘individualised society of employees’. These findings therefore challenge the notion of the pervasiveness of individualism and the dismissal of class and collective orientations as important influences on identity formation.

**Keywords: Class, collectivism, identity, occupational community, redundancy.**

## **Introduction**

From the conclusion of Goldthorpe *et al*’s (1968) classic study to the more extreme prognoses of Beck (1992), Giddens (1990, 1991), and Lash and Urry (1987), class and collective identity have been presented as increasingly marginal to peoples’ sense of identity and self-image. These views have not gone unchallenged. Empirically informed contributions by the likes of Savage *et al* (2001) or Skeggs (1997) have

critically evaluated changes in attitudes towards class and offer a repackaged role for class in identity formation. Alternately, the adjacent debate on occupational communities posits the centrality of collectivism and class to the formation of identity (Salaman 1971, 1975, Strangleman 2001), and crucially situates employment centre stage within the analysis, an issue that has arguably been marginalized in other areas of the debate. In keeping with this position, this paper considers the ongoing importance of class and collectivism to personal identity, and the role that this plays during a period of personal and collective crisis. Our study is based on the findings of a programme of research into the social and economic effects of redundancy in the Welsh steel industry. A key theme that emerged during the conduct of the research was the repeated spontaneous self-identification of respondents in terms of occupational community and the articulation of class-based thinking. Given that the research was charting the post redundancy experiences of ex-steel workers, this raised the question whether this constant reference to previous occupational status held any deeper significance. We argue that this reflected the on-going desire to maintain the collective identity of the past occupational community as a form of resistance to the increased individualisation of the post-redundancy experience, which for many meant unemployment or low paid, insecure jobs. The paper argues that this desire to maintain a collective orientation in the face of such changes, and the importance of class-based thinking to the expression of self image, also suggests a resistance to submergence in an existence akin to Beck's (1992, pp.100) class free 'individualised society of employees'. The paper is structured as follows, after a review of pertinent debates and a discussion of our research methodology, the empirical findings are presented in three sections. The first section explores the centrality of work to identity formation and the importance of the continued role of the occupational community.

The second section examines how the collective identity of the occupational community related to broader notions of class identity; whilst the third section considers why people with different experiences of post-redundancy transition away from the steel industry continued to reference their steelworker identity.

### **A Review of Debates**

The importance of class to identity has polarised opinion between those that are dismissive of the ongoing relevance of class identity and those that have attempted to demonstrate its continued relevance albeit often within redefined terms. Thus, for Beck (1992), modern society has moved beyond class. Likewise, for Giddens (1998) and Lash and Urry (1987) the working class is disappearing, its membership has waned numerically and working class communities have become spatially decentred and gone into decline. From this perspective identity has become more individualised and decentred, no longer dominated by class identity but shaped by an *a la carte* range of influences from which individuals, emancipated from a collective consciousness, are free to choose (Beck, 1992, Lash and Urry, 1987, Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1998). Yet, such assertions are at odds with empirical studies in the area. The workers in Devine's (1992) study, for example, continued to hold a collective class identity and they described the class structure and their place within it. Similarly, Westergaard *et al's* (1989) study reports that respondents still engaged in spontaneous self-identification through 'class tags', and articulated a sense of class solidarity. For Marshall *et al* (1988), the propensity of individuals to think in class terms suggests a structural awareness, plus a feeling of a shared and distinctive group identity - a perception of 'us' as distinct from 'them' (Turnbull 1992, Westergaard 1989, Lockwood 1966). The important point here is that although thinking in class terms

may not be synonymous with the class consciousness needed for the generation of political action, it does demonstrate an awareness of class as a structural reality. Ultimately, 'thinking in class terms' is bound up with a sense of collective identity.

More recent contributions, however, have suggested that the recognition of class structures now coexists with an ambivalence towards class identification (Savage *et al* 2001), or even 'disidentification' (Skeggs 1997). Class is recognised as existing in wider society, but crucially not determining self-identity (Skeggs 1997). Notable within these contributions is the imperative to repackage class in terms of an individualised awareness, to "leave behind the romantic baggage which portrays class cultures as collective" (Savage *et al* 2001, pp.888) and see class recognition as providing external 'benchmarks' to sustain and articulate individualised identities. At one level this represents a worthwhile repudiation of the 'baby and bathwater' approach of the likes of Beck, Giddens and Lash and Urry, and an attempt to reconcile issues of class identity with changes in economic and social structures, and greater geographic mobility that has undermined working class community consciousness (Goldthorpe 1968, Bourke 1994). It is interesting that where respondents in Savage *et al's* (2001) study did reference class identification it was based on their upbringing or on a broadly abstract sense of the need to sell their labour to earn a living. Thus, employment itself was regarded in abstract terms; there was little reference to the type of employment, no privileging of occupational identity, and no sense of work as a collective experience. Here work is an individualised experience, detached from community and seemingly impacting only obliquely on the respondent's sense of identity. Yet, we would argue that the importance of employment (or absence of it) and the contribution of occupational identity to both

individual identity and class identity should not be ignored, but rather returned to centre stage within the debate. The common pattern of lived experiences is essential for explaining the development of common identities (Brenner 1989).

The shared experience of work is a strong influence over the creation of social collectivity (Salaman 1975). Work as a collective experience, not just in terms of the presence or absence of union organisation but in terms of the shared experience of the labour process, may act a basis for group identity (Brenner 1989 Jenkins 1996). Particularly where work is either demanding, dangerous or highly skilled, individuals can develop a strong emotional attachment to their work (Turnbull 1992, Salaman 1975), and identity becomes shaped by reference to occupation (Salaman 1971, 1975, Allcorn and Marsh 1975, Turnbull 1992, Strangleman 2001). Strong occupational identities are often represented in terms of occupational communities, where members perceive themselves to share attributes and values that embed them in a collective identity of solidaristic relationships that set them apart from the rest of society (Salaman 1971, Blauner 1960, Linkon and Russo 2002). Within such occupational communities work-based relationships permeate into lives outside of work, which provides for socialisation into the shared values and norms that make up the occupational identity (Salaman 1971, 1975, Allcorn and Marsh 1975, Blauner 1960, Strangleman 2001). This sense of collective identity based on perceived group similarities and distinctiveness from others (Jenkins 1996) may be heightened where the occupational community coincides with geographic proximity - and spatial isolation more so - plus peculiar hours of work (Salaman 1971, 1975, Strangleman 2001, Blauner 1960). This collective identity also tends to be reflected in and supported by collective organisation; trade unions tend to play an important role in

such occupational communities (Salaman 1971, Strangleman 2001). Metzgar's (2000) account of life in a steel community in the USA emphasises the importance of the union for the material well being of steelworkers, but also, importantly, as a means to and, reflection of, community and class solidarity.

It has been noted that the development of strong occupational solidarities could inhibit the emergence of class solidarity by restricting affinities to the boundaries of the occupational group (Salaman 1975, Allcorn and Marsh 1975, Turnbull 1992). Strangleman (2001), in his study of coal miners, distances himself from the many historical accounts that present such occupational communities as ideal-typical repositories of working-class life, yet argues in a more nuanced fashion, which stresses individual agency, that class remains a key concept in shaping the identities and choices made by individuals within the community. The links between class, occupational community and identity are viewed through the lens of mass redundancy, during which the class relationships that Strangleman (2001) sees as a key component of the occupational community become particularly important "as actors are forced back on a more limited range of resources" (Strangleman 2001, pp.265). These and other studies point to the range of challenges generated by redundancy in terms of individual and collective identity; adjustment to the absence of identity shaping social interaction in the workplace, plus a loss of routine (Strangleman 2001), and a loss of income, which in turn undermines another key identity touchstone in terms of the traditional male-breadwinner role (Willott and Griffen 2004, Binns and Mars 1984). Those finding new employment often report loss in material terms, due to less remunerated and secure work (Tomaney *et al* 1999, Strangleman 2001), but also a sense of loss associated with the absence of

camaraderie experienced in their previous employment (Strangleman 2001, Linkon and Russo 2002). Furthermore, Westergaard *et al's* (1989) study of redundancies in the Sheffield steel industry cites the dangers of workers being cut off from each other and their previous circle of contacts, leading to identities being far more 'privatised' than they had been in work (Westergaard *et al* 1989). Conversely, Strangleman's (2001) study of redundant miners suggests an ongoing reliance on old occupational communities for maintaining a sense of identity and helping cope with the challenges posed by the loss of employment in the mining industry. The continued importance of networks based on previous occupational community again questions the pervasiveness of processes of individualisation and privatisation at the expense of more collectively oriented identities (Devine 1992, Strangleman 2001), and points to the importance of collectivism and class to personal identity during a time of crisis. The present paper explores the links between class, occupational community and identity using findings from a study into the economic and social effects of redundancy in the Welsh steel industry. The paper reveals the ongoing importance of collectivism and class to identity, and argues that the occupational community, whilst important itself to notions of collectivism, also served as a means to articulate class-based identity.

## **Research Methods**

The research explored the experiences of redundant workers from five Welsh steel plants. Four plants were owned by the Anglo-Dutch Steel Corporation CORUS, located in Port Talbot, Llanwern (Newport), Ebbw Vale and Shotton. The fifth plant was owned by Allied Steel and Wire (ASW) and was located in the Cardiff. At their peak, all of the plants had employed many thousands of workers (often over ten thousand), but this had declined significantly from the early 1980s as periodic bouts



of restructuring took their effect. Since May 2001, over 3000 jobs have been lost from the Welsh steel industry, primarily at the CORUS sites, with the Ebbw Vale plant closing down. In July 2002, the ASW plant in Cardiff was put into receivership, with the loss of 800 jobs; with workers informed they would only be entitled to statutory redundancy payments and that their pensions entitlements had been lost<sup>i</sup>.

Our key concern was to investigate the economic and social impacts of redundancy on steel workers and their families, how they experienced this and how they sought to cope with it and build lives 'post' steel. The research involved interviews with redundant steelworkers, their partners, economic agencies, plus trade union and management experts. In total, 125 workers were interviewed (93 percent of which were men), along with a sample of their partners (nine). Interviewing workers who have recently been made redundant is naturally a sensitive process and accessing a sample for research purposes is not straightforward. To assist with this, the research team were granted access to, and the support of, the offices of Steel Partnership Training (SPT), the training arm of the main steel trade union the ISTC Community Union<sup>ii</sup>. SPT has established offices close to all the main steel plants effected by redundancy and, with the aid of European Social Fund money, has appointed staff (typically ex steel workers themselves) to offer counselling, training opportunities and job search facilities to redundant steel workers and their partners.

SPT has established a data set of all steel workers made redundant in Wales since 2001, from which we derived our research sample. A sample of respondents was chosen from each site on a random basis, stratified by age and occupational experience. The interviews themselves were of a semi-structured nature, and sought to

build up individual ‘biographies’ of redundant workers. The interviews lasted between one and three hours, with one and a half hours the norm. In addition, non-participant observation was conducted within the offices of SPT, at union meetings and at agency drop-in sessions held at local social clubs and colleges.

Two points need to be made with regard to the focus and generalisability of our research. First, the issues of class and identity were not originally part of the aims of the project, and whilst the interview schedules contained questions on the impact of redundancies on the local community there were no questions specifically regarding the issues of class or identity. Nonetheless, given the freedom of expression allowed within the interviews, participants repeatedly self-identified, and spoke of others, in class terms and in terms of occupational community. Thus class and identity emerged as important themes because participants raised these issues as they sought to depict the concerns central to their individual ‘biographies’, thereby demonstrating the importance of these concepts to individual identity (Savage *et al* 2001). Second, the decline in occupational communities over recent years does raise issues regarding their generalisable utility. However, as Salaman (1975) points out, their relevance as a field of study is due to the insight they offer into subjective collectives, the link between work and non-work lives and the impact this has on relationships, identities and notions of solidarity, which has resonance for any other occupation. Having entered these caveats, we now turn to our empirical findings.

### **Occupational community and identity**

The continued importance of the steelworker identity became apparent as respondents repeatedly self-identified in terms of the occupational title of ‘steelworker’, post

redundancy. The basis of this identity had several facets, in keeping with the defining characteristics of an occupational community. The ex-steelworkers demonstrated a strong emotional attachment to their previous work and a firmly established group identity, deeply embedded in a sense of the collective and the community. The nature of the work and the peculiarity of the shift patterns fostered a strong sense of distinctiveness in terms of the notion of being a steelworker. This was reflected in a certain set of shared values, which in part translated the shared experience of this particular type of hard, physically demanding and dangerous work into virtues that helped define the group. These shared experiences and values helped create a strong camaraderie between co-workers, further buoyed by socialising outside of the workplace, and often living in close spatial proximity. There was a perception that such camaraderie would be difficult to find in workplaces outside of the industry. For many the loss of this camaraderie and the loss of the social side of daily employment were amongst the hardest things to come to terms with following redundancy. There were examples of ex-steelworkers consciously trying to sustain these work-based social networks post redundancy.

“A handful of us get together once a month for a meal, and we still always talk in the ‘Royal we’ about the plant, so it's still in the back of our minds”.

These were not simply social occasions but also acted as a vital collective support mechanism and carried a deeper purpose of maintaining a sense of collective identity. It should be noted that the strong sense of a collective identity was further reflected in and buttressed by a commitment to formal collective organisation. Whether individual

support had been latent or active, trade unions were regarded as a given aspect of life. Participants were on occasion critical of union policy, or the handling of particular events, but the commitment to the principles of collective solidarity remained.

Turnbull (1992) suggests an occupational based identity may offer the individual the highest status and most positive self-image available to them. Certainly the occupation of 'steelworker' was perceived by respondents to intrinsically carry cache within the local community. The high earnings associated with the occupation, which allowed access to material goods and associated status that would be unattainable on lower wages, further sustained this status. Making the adjustment to the loss of such income proved difficult even for those finding employment elsewhere in the local economy.

“On shifts and with overtime I was on 30k-plus. Outside you have to be management level to get that, you’d have to have a good job”.

“I dropped eight and half grand, so it’s had a financial impact, me and my wife have experienced financial difficulties.... So we’ve had to cut out cloth accordingly”.

“I’d worked 32 years at ASW, worked up to a tidy job, I was doing well. I went from X-thousands of pounds a year to 50 quid a week”.

The financial adjustment was obviously pronounced for those going from earning a high wage to receiving state benefits, but beyond this loss of income people

recognised an impact in terms of identity and self-image. For many of those accessing Job Seekers Allowance, often for the first time, the receipt of benefits was regarded as an affront to their dignity, based on the self-image developed as a hard working, high wage earning steelworker. The use of the term “going cap in hand” reflected the attitude shared by many who had been used to providing for themselves and their families. The very process of interacting with support agencies was often presented as unfamiliar and alienating, particularly dealing with the job centre. It was interesting that SPT was the only agency to receive repeated praise from those that had experienced the range of support available. The fact that SPT was staffed by ex-steelworkers was often cited as a key factor in this, seemingly obviating the danger that the redundant workers would regard such support providers as well-meaning, but disconnected and patronizing, as reported in Metzgar’s (2000) study:

“SPT have been the best of all. They’re more understanding, because they have the industry background, of the struggle of industrial people.”

The fact that SPT was providing a support service that was dedicated to the steel redundancies contributed to the continued sense of a unique and separate group identity, in which individuals continued to identify with the occupational community as something distinctive from wider society.

Because of the celebration of ‘hard work’ as a key group value, the anxiety of dealing with the absence of work was arguably heightened amongst ex-steelworkers. However, it was not only employment in the steel mill but work per se that was

central to a sense of self and self worth, which in turn was sensitive to how individuals were perceived by others:

“If you meet someone and they ask you what are you doing, everything stems from that. If you are not working they think you are a lazy bastard”.

“I can’t handle not working... I can’t handle hanging around the house”.

The second quote also alludes to the impact on the sense of identity of the loss of daily participation in the ‘public sphere’ of work and relegation to the ‘private sphere’ of the home, a traditional divide between the realm of the male breadwinner and that of their partners (Willott and Griffin 2004). In terms of the breadwinner identity there were repeated expressions of guilt, frustration and a sense of helplessness at the inability to fulfil this traditional role. This was intrinsically linked to issues of masculine identity. For many, becoming a man, and a fully-fledged member of the community, were interwoven with the commencement of work at the steel mill, often following in the footsteps of familial male role models, frequently spanning several generations.

### *The Post-Occupational Community*

The occupational community continued to play an important role post redundancy, despite the loss of the material basis for its existence. This was apparent in both the Ebbw Vale site, where geography heightened the link between occupational

community and spatial proximity, and within the urban sites of Llanwern (Newport) and Cardiff. The significance of the continued role of the occupational community beyond the workplace lay in maintaining social dynamics; just as work, and its termination, had been collective experiences, life post-redundancy was also a collective experience. Many interviewees cited the importance of the mutual support provided by ex-colleagues, both in moral, and material terms. Job searches and accessing support agencies often became collective undertakings, plus the general sharing of experiences with community members described as “in the same boat” helped people deal with unfamiliar and often alienating processes. In addition the community was seen as playing an important role in terms of the communication of information. Just as work in the steel industry had often been gained through word of mouth recommendation, some redundant workers continued to see this as the best mechanism for finding alternative employment. There was also information circulated regarding access to funds for training, and benefits available. Furthermore, many views expressed by interviewees regarding the post-redundancy experience were based on perspectives gleaned from this information network, which were often treated as a proxy for personal experience. This heightened the sense of collective experience, and often provided a binding mythology important to the continuation of the group identity.

The importance of the post-occupational community demonstrated the continued commitment to a collective identity, which challenges assumptions of ubiquitous individualism and ‘privatism’. Certainly when asked about their immediate concerns following the redundancy announcements, the majority of interviewees cited the financial and emotional well being of their immediate families. Families also played

important roles in terms of emotional and material support for redundant individuals. These were not, however, unambiguous declarations of individualism and privatism. In many cases extended families were themselves inscribed into the occupational community, and thus “in the same boat”, but beyond this there was clear concern and affinity with the plight of other ex-steel workers and their families. Interestingly there was a recurrent theme of younger workers expressing concern for older workers who may struggle to find work, or in the case of ASW would be unable to rebuild pension contributions, and older workers suggesting younger colleagues faced the greater challenge due to mortgage payments and dependent children.

“I’m young enough not to have to worry too much, but my colleagues were badly affected. I’m more upset for other people, more worried for them, but it was still a kick in the teeth for me”.

“My children are grown up so things aren’t as bad for me as they have been for some of the other steelworkers”

This continued use of occupational title and reflection on the relative experiences of a shared fate suggests the collectivist orientation of the occupational community had continued resonance. This begs the question whether the importance of the steelworker identity, and the associated expressions of solidarity, have any significance in terms of wider class identity or remain restricted to the level of camaraderie between members of the occupational community.

### **Class and Identity**



As Salaman (1975) points out, the development of strong occupational solidarities could inhibit the emergence of class solidarity if the 'us' in the 'them and us' divide is defined by the occupational group and not in broader class terms. In our research the sense of collective identity was not solely based on occupational community, as important as this was, but also demonstrated thinking in class terms. This was manifest in a recognised and articulated distinction between 'them', management as representatives of the employer, and the collective 'us' of the workers. What is more, this class based thinking was extended to an appreciation of the structural position of other workers and sensitivity to collective interests and common problems. Despite a recognised material interest in the well being of the organisation, this did not extend to a unitarist view of the employment relationship. The traditional view of a clear contradistinction between management and worker prevailed:

“British Steel, Corus paid a good rate, they were a good employer from that point of view. It's still 'them and us', but you can work together”.

There were inevitably ambiguities within this delineation; some workers from ASW did speak of the period running up to closure in terms of common interests. More commonly, ex-Corus workers spoke of management not upholding their side of the bargain in terms of attempts to improve organisational performance over recent years, again suggesting a perceived separation between the plight of workers and managers. Any residual sense of overlapping material interest in the wellbeing of the organisation was eclipsed by the divergence of experience at point of redundancy. The distinction between 'them' and the collective 'us' was thrown into sharp relief. In

the Corus cases, management were the ones that made the decisions on which plants faced redundancies and even closure. Interestingly this process did not foster resentment towards workers in surviving plants, despite management attempts to develop inter-plant competition, but rather generated grievance over the basis on which decisions were made, and management's perceived duplicity or incompetence in recognising good performance.

Amongst ex-ASW workers there was a near unanimous impression that management had known about the closure far in advance of its communication to the workforce. This non-disclosure was felt by many to have been to the disadvantage of non-managerial staff. This perception was compounded by key senior managers leaving the firm with large severance payouts and, crucially, retaining their pensions prior to the announcement of closure being made. There was also anger at the way in which the announcements were finally made, again relating to the withholding of information, although anger seemed to be directed at management in abstract terms, with some sympathy expressed for the immediate line-managers left to face the workers. Furthermore, although many held management responsible for a legacy of mismanagement, and guilty of mishandling the circumstances in which the company found itself, the final decision regarding closure was widely perceived as having been 'taken out of their hands'. Much of the blame was directed towards faceless financial institutions, which were presented as having foreclosed on debts, despite order books being full, and then asset stripped the company without regard for the plight of the employees.

“[The Receivers have] taken the piss. They kept people on to pay the banks, they had no interest in the workers.”

With regards to the allocation of culpability a theme emerged amongst ex-ASW workers, which was in part echoed by ex-Corus workers, that located their collective plight within the workings of an essentially hostile ‘system’. With this came a sense of powerlessness in the face of the forces beyond the influence of local management and even national trade union structures. There was a degree of resignation to the outcome of an unstoppable combine, in which capital, in the form of both national and multinational steel corporations, financial institutions, in the form of banks and Receivers, and various manifestations of the State, from Westminster to the Welsh Assembly, acted – or in terms of the State, failed to act – to the detriment of the collective interest of workers. This was not seen, however, in terms of the isolated instance of personal experience, but rather as indicative of the challenges facing all workers. The government’s inaction, for example, was perceived not just in terms of failing to intervene in support of the steel industry in the UK, but for a general long-term absence of an industrial policy geared towards protecting jobs in the primary and manufacturing sectors: jobs that were traditionally secure and relatively well paid.

“The government, it’s easy to slag them off but they did nothing. A total let down... It’s difficult to see what the Assembly does for Wales.

“We’re creating jobs” – but its all in call centres”.

For ex-ASW workers these themes of class based thinking, in terms of ‘them and us’, and a sense of wider class solidarity, were played out over the issue of the pension.

Many described the loss of their pension as a greater source of anguish than the redundancy itself, and anger towards the employer - described by one interviewee as 'thieves in pinstripe suits' - was understandably strong. Although people were acutely aware of the financial implications of the loss of pension for themselves and their families, the issue tended to be discussed in collective terms. It was presented as the workers of ASW, as a group having been deprived of their pension rights by the connivance of senior management, the collective 'us' suffering at the hands of 'them'. However, although blame for the mismanagement of the pension fund was squarely levelled at ASW as an employer, considerable anger and culpability was also, again, directed towards the State for having allowed it to happen by the absence of any "law against it". Repeated reference was made to the 'Maxwell scandal', through which people demonstrated an affinity and solidarity with workers who had shared a similar fate at the hands of their employer, and resentment that the State had failed to legislate to protect workers subsequently. Furthermore, workers who had been made redundant from Corus with their pensions intact made repeated reference to the plight of ASW workers and the need for statutory protection for pensions. In this way the issue of pensions was conceptualised in class terms as an issue that had already affected workers in other locations, and with the then absence of legislation, potentially posed a threat to others in the future. This reflected the appreciation of a common structural location, and a solidarity based on an essentially class based problem of workers being maltreated by employers and let down by the State.

Interviewees from various sites extended the class-based conceptualisation of a structural commonality to workers beyond the UK. This tended to be tied into further criticism of the lack of state protection for workers in the UK compared to other EU

countries, and the subsequent incentive this was perceived to provide to multinational employers to make redundancies in the UK rather than elsewhere, both in steel and in the wider economy.

“The British only fight when there’s a war on, other times we’ll take anything, loss of jobs and so on. On the continent they wouldn’t have it and they’ve got the protection of the unions. But our government won’t sign up to the EU agenda and British workers are not getting a fair deal”.

The comparison to workers in other countries again demonstrates an appreciation of shared structural location. However, there was also a sense that despite a solidarity based on common experience this had not been translated into effective ‘class action’. Disillusionment with the Labour government, and a mixture of disappointment and resignation over the impotence of union opposition to redundancy (despite appreciation of the concessions won from management over the redundancy process, particularly in Corus) characterised the two traditional vehicles of political and industrial action in defence of workers’ interests. As one redundant steel worker observed:

“If it was in France the workers would tear the place up. In this country there’s no fight”.

Despite the recognition of a common structural location of workers in France and the UK, alternative class based responses in terms of direct action were regarded as unlikely in this context.

### **Identity and Transition**

It has been argued that the strong occupational based identity developed by steelworkers was located within broader class based thinking. Given the context of the research, how the post-redundancy transition would impact upon and indeed be shaped by occupational and class based identity became key issues. Although each individual's post-redundancy experience told its own story, a number of broad trends were discernable within the processes of transition. Some interviewees had found alternative full-time, stable employment, as commercial drivers, gas fitters and in other manufacturing settings, and although earnings were not as good as working in the steel industry they were not considered to be low paid jobs. Others had enlisted for training, funded through the redundancy support mechanisms, with a view to moving into such work in the future. Despite this commitment to transition to alternative employment the occupational identity of the steelworks continued to loom large. One man who had found work in glass manufacturing suggested that despite his relative "luck" in finding a well paid job he continued to regard himself as a steelworker, just working somewhere else, and declared he "always" would be a steelworker. This sense of displacement and continued self-referencing to the previous occupational identity was echoed by others who had made the transition into alternative employment.

A smaller grouping of individuals had targeted a transition into what might be deemed more middle-class professions, such as teaching, youth work, physiotherapy, sports-therapy and counselling work, the latter including redundant steelworkers now working for the support agency SPT. Some had taken the ‘opportunity’ offered by redundancy and the subsequent support for training to realise long-held ambitions to move into such occupations, others had begun training of their own volition prior to the announcement of redundancies, as part of a longer-term strategy to move out of the steel industry. Such transitions raised issues of both occupational identity and class identity. The impact that work in the steel industry had had on identity formation remained a strong theme, whether this was regarded as a good thing in terms of the positive attributes associated with the steelworker identity, or whether departure from the steel industry was seen as some form of escape. In either instance this was not just about changing jobs, but rather leaving behind an identity shaping occupational community that was strongly embedded in class identity, an act which was tinged with uncertainty and self-doubt over whether such a transition could be successfully achieved. As one ex-steelworker who had successfully moved into teaching observed:

Being in the steel industry for 25 years I wasn’t prepared for it [a degree course in teaching]. I had no qualifications....I thought to myself, ‘what am I doing here?’ ... ‘they’re all bound to be better than me the young whiz kids’. That was a defining moment for me, I had to go across the threshold or turn back. I stepped across the threshold.

For other ex-steelworkers the transition stories were not so positive or optimistic. Many were unemployed and living on benefits, or engaged in low paid, precarious employment, and often expressed a vision of the future that consisted of a mixture of the two. Many older workers felt that their age was a major obstacle to finding new employment, based on a combination of personal experience of employers' aversion to recruitment, and the experiences of ex-colleagues communicated through the community network. Many had reached the conclusion that they would be unlikely to find paid employment again, the implications of which varied according to whether they had received the redundancy package and pension rights offered by CORUS or had left ASW with neither. For the latter in particular, deprived of financial resources beyond the basic state provision, there was a heightened imperative to find work and a realisation they would need to remain active in the labour market long after the statutory retirement age. Many younger workers shared pessimism over the type of jobs that were on offer in the local labour market. It was notable that repeated reference was made to "stacking shelves" in a local supermarket, often on non-standard contracts, as the only employment option available. Some interviewees had experienced such employment first hand, or related tales of those who had. Many more used the term as kind of short-hand to describe frustrating experiences of job search. Interestingly the notion of stacking shelves in a supermarket seemed to have taken on a symbolic value within the post-occupational community, again reflecting the capacity for information transmission and the apparent retention of a role in the communication of values. Stacking shelves in a supermarket had become symbolic of low pay, low status, precarious employment available in the local labour market. Such jobs were the antithesis of peoples' experiences within the steel industry, where



hitherto secure employment and high wages had brought prosperity and status, even for semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

Even in the more diverse economies of the larger urban centres, such as Cardiff and Newport (Llanwern), there was often a perception of severe constraints on choice and significant barriers to employment. The lack of transferability of skills due to the absence of formal certification was perceived as a major obstacle to finding new employment. Ironically the steelworker identity itself was also regarded as a barrier due to a perceived prejudice held by employers, based on preconceptions of steelworkers as inflexible, militant and undesirable appointees. Even though they carried negative connotations, such perceptions of employer attitudes emphasised the impact of the steelworker identity on the life experience of ex-steelworkers, and the feeling of being judged collectively rather than individually ironically reinforced the continued strength of this identity. It fuelled the sense of group distinctiveness: not only did a life in steel provide the individual with the inclination that they could not do anything else, it also meant, that for many, the world outside contrived to not let them do anything else.

SPT as a support organisation played an important role here. At one level, SPT had been successful in confronting the dangers of isolation associated with being out of work, and had perpetuated the sense that the loss of employment and the post-redundancy adjustment were collective experiences. Much of this success had been premised on the strength of the collective identity of the occupational community, and as suggested, SPT's activities fuelled this sense of group distinctiveness after its material basis of employment had gone. Yet, at another level, SPT also sought to

challenge aspects of the steel worker identity, where it was seen as an obstacle to transition, preventing ex-steelworkers accessing work, or more significantly, deterring people from seeking work or training. For example, one senior advisor from SPT was observed at a mass meeting of ex-ASW workers confronting the crowd with the message “you’re not a steelworker anymore”. The dualism in the presentation of the occupational community as at once being endowed with positive attributes such as a strong work ethic, yet in turn acting as a constraint upon adaptation to new labour market opportunities echoes the findings of Strangleman *et al’s* (1999) study of coal miners. Challenging the continued orientation around the steel worker identity as an obstacle to transition may have been an expediency for SPT to facilitate engagement with the transition process, but this begs the question of why people in this situation had held on to this identity and whether this conveyed any deeper meaning.

For many redundant steelworkers maintaining a commitment to their occupational identity could be seen as serving important symbolic purposes. At a basic level, this reflected a desire to maintain an identity and self-image that was the most positive available (Turnbull 1992). For those who were unemployed the continued orientation around the identity of the occupational community could be seen as a means of offsetting the perceived indignity of relying on benefits rather than earning a wage. For those facing the reality, or the prospect, of lower paid, lower status employment the continuation of the steelworker identity provided an alternative reference point, sustaining a sense of dignity in employment not wholly provided by reference to new employment alternatives. In this sense the continued retrospective orientation towards the steelworker identity can be seen as a response to loss of status, and a means of coping with uncertainty and adjustment. As such it could be argued that rather than

acting as an obstacle to moving on, reference to the steel identity provided a means of coping with this adjustment, thus facilitating transition rather than hindering it. At a deeper level, however, this continued orientation towards the steelworker identity can be seen as a refusal to accept the broader social implications of low paid, insecure employment. New work places were often depicted as lacking camaraderie, and as not providing a basis for occupational identity or group identity, comparative to previous experience. Continued reference to the steelworker identity can be seen as a way of compensating for these shortcomings, in order to maintain the collective identity associated with the old occupational community as an antidote to the individualism experienced in many new work environments, or for others through unemployment.

## **Conclusion**

Within this study the significance of the steel worker identity lay in its continued resonance post-redundancy. At one level this provided a positive self-image that acted as a coping mechanism for dealing with material loss and adjustment; beyond this lay a deep rooted and ongoing commitment to a collective orientation. People actively constructed redundancy as a social experience, not simply to help sustain a sense of self-worth, but also to learn from others how to cope with the changes they were experiencing. The desire to maintain a collective identity was further reflected in, and held implications for, the formal collective organisation of labour. The ISTC had continued to play an active role in the post-occupational community, both through its role as a community union and via the activities of the union's subsidiary organisation SPT. The union therefore both benefited from, and contributed to, the maintenance of a collective identity.

This ongoing articulation of a collective identity and solidarity begged the question whether this had any significance in terms of wider class identity or remained restricted to the level of camaraderie between members of the post-occupational community. It has been argued that the collectivism that was intrinsic to the steel worker identity, although heavily premised on the occupational community, extended to a sense of class identity and solidarity. The group identity of the steelworker was based on a sense of distinction, but rather than leading to excessive particularism based on the occupational community, it served as mechanism through which class based thinking and class identity were articulated, and allowed for the recognition of a shared structural location and problems in common with workers elsewhere. Through further abstraction a deeper purpose can be ascribed to these developments in terms of providing a defence mechanism to afford some sense of protection against the changes affecting these communities, not just in terms of material loss, but also in broader social terms. Ultimately the assertion of this collective identity can be seen as a means of resistance against submergence in the life the external labour market had to offer, one characterised by low pay, lack of security, and a loss of identity within an existence akin to Beck's (1992, pp.100) vision of an 'individualised society of employees'. Indeed the crisis of redundancy that removed the occupational basis for collective identity provided the imperative for its re-articulation.

This position also holds relevance for the likes of Savage *et al* (2001) and Skeggs (1997) who have carried forward the debate on class and identity, suggesting individualised cultures and ambivalence towards class are consistent with its continued influence. In keeping with Savage *et al* (2001, pp.882), amongst these ex-steel workers, class was indeed a means of understanding social and political change,

but this was not social and political change in general or abstract terms, but rather change that was being lived through, change that was real and intimate. As collective identity and class became means of understanding the crisis of redundancy, and dealing with it in material terms (Strangleman 2001), it is understandable that such concepts would be regarded with less distance or ambivalence. Clearly crises, although endemic to the capitalist system, represent exceptional circumstances in terms of lived experiences. However, our research suggests that collective and class based identity were long-standing features of the occupational community of steelworkers. Such occupational communities have declined over recent decades, which raises obvious issues regarding their generalisable utility in research terms. As Salaman (1975) points out, however, such communities offer insights into subjective collectives that hold resonance for other occupations. Indeed the transitions witnessed within this study, away from collectively organised, well-paid, stable work toward a range of alternatives adds a further dimension to this. Even where the employment relationship has become more fragmented and individualised, work – or its absence - can shape peoples’ sense of themselves, how they perceive others, and how they are perceived in return. Work dominates employees’ lives in temporal terms, and provides a key determinate of material social inequalities, which proponents of a more individualised based identity formation continue to recognise, but not explain (Savage *et al* 2001). We contend that employment - or its absence – plays an important part in shaping identity on a collective and individual basis. We suggest, therefore, that there is a need to return the issue of employment to centre stage in terms of the debate on identity, particularly with regards to class, and to the corresponding research agendas seeking to carry these debates forward.

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<sup>i</sup> In context, as interviewing began (Summer 2002) the UK average unemployment rate was 3.1 per cent, compared to 7 percent in Cardiff, 3.6 percent in Newport, 4.9 percent in Neath Port Talbot and 7.2 percent in Blaneau Gwent (Ebbw Vale). All five areas had experienced a reduction in unemployment rates since the mid-1990s, the greatest being in the urban areas, notably Cardiff, with relatively small declines in unemployment in Blaneau Gwent. Politically, all the localities have a history of returning large Labour majorities, although in 2005 Blaneau Gwent returned an ex-Labour Welsh Assembly Member standing as an independent candidate.

<sup>ii</sup> Formerly the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation.

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