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Author(s): Stephen Brooke

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GENDER AND WORKING CLASS IDENTITY IN BRITAIN DURING THE 1950s

By Stephen Brooke

York University, Toronto

In Britain during the 1950s, working class living standards were undeniably improved by full employment and comprehensive welfare provision. But this progress and prosperity may have worn away the singularity and coherence of working class identity. In 1961, the Polish emigré and long-time student of the British working classes, Ferdynand Zweig, noted that “[w]orking-class life finds itself on the move towards new middle-class values and middle-class existence. . . . the change can only be described as a deep transformation of values, as the development of new ways of thinking and feeling, a new ethos, new aspirations and cravings.”¹ In his 1958 satire of post-war society, Michael Young, the founder of the Institute for Community Studies, similarly asserted that “the lower classes no longer have a distinctive ideology in conflict with the ethos of society.”² The rise in living standards and economic security in Britain during the 1950s—what has been called the experience of “affluence”—has thus been linked to a “dislocation in working class tradition.”³ This impression gathered force after the Conservative Party’s third straight electoral victory in 1959. “[C]lass hybrids—working class in terms of occupation, education, speech, and cultural norms, while . . . middle class in terms of income and material comforts” were thought to have played a critical role in the Conservatives’ success.⁴ From the New Left to the Labour Party right, a common starting point for the discussion of socialist strategy after 1959 was that the working classes had changed. Even those, like E.P. Thompson, who dismissed the “*myth of classlessness* [original emphasis]” still admitted that a “new ‘working-class consciousness’” had appeared.⁵

Some feared that this birth implied the death of an older class consciousness. Portraits of this metamorphosis have, since the 1950s, often been studies in loss and antagonism, often mediated through a nostalgia which accorded stability, integrity and moral heft to a vanished working class world uncompromised by affluence and materialism.⁶ In this vision, even material deprivation became more compelling than affluence: “[t]he old defensive culture of poverty gave working class children . . . a sense of security which is denied the present generation,” Jeremy Seabrook has written, for example.⁷

Rumours of the death of working class consciousness in Britain have, of course, been greatly exaggerated. The level and ferocity of industrial unrest in the country during the late 1960s and early 1970s hardly suggests its mortality. Secondly, as James Cronin has argued, the emphasis placed on the death of class may have been and may continue to be an indication of the Left’s failure to articulate adequately “the compatibility of dramatic material improvement and persistent class identity,” rather than a convincing account of a real absence.⁸ These are crucial qualifications, but they should discipline rather than displace an examination of the discourse of working class transformation in the fifties. Though it clearly animated and has continued to animate discussions of class structure and political strategy from the 1950s to the 1980s, the historical context of working

class structure, outlook and identity in Britain during the 1950s remains under-examined. The present article addresses the relationship of gender to class within this discourse.

I

Recent scholarship has emphasized the place of gender in the formation of British working class identity during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁹ If gender attended the birth of the English working classes, was it also present at their (apparent) death?

Some aspects of the history and culture of gender in the 1950s have attracted scholarly attention.¹⁰ The particular relationship between gender and class within the post-war working classes remains less well-explored.¹¹ Nicky Hart provides an exception to this with a contribution which stresses the centrality of gender to changes in class outlook in the post-war period. Hart argues that the gender inequality crucial to class formation declined, replaced by gender "convergency" (largely in wages): "one concomitant of the diminution of class consciousness which accompanied the growing affluence of manual workers was a decline in gender inequality." Just as "[g]ender inequality is the missed ingredient in the rise of class politics," Hart writes, "gender convergence is the secret of its decline" in the post-war period.¹² The value of Hart's contribution is in its insistence that gender and class were interconnected in the fifties. Its specific arguments overstate the gender convergence of the fifties. The growth of part-time work for women certainly offered material gains for women, but in other spheres, it is hard to see a clear empirical case for any convergence between male and female workers. This is particularly true in terms of the wage differential between men and women. If we look at the period between 1924 and 1970, the largest gap between male and female earnings came in 1940, when women earned 42% of men's wages; the smallest difference came in 1946, when women earned 55% of men's wages. The average wage differential was fairly consistent at approximately 50.4%.¹³ Thus in material terms, convergence was not very great. The persistence of wage disparity would have been much more obvious. Strikes by female workers at Ford's Dagenham plant in 1968 and Lucas' Acton factory the following year brought this disparity to the public eye. One might also say that Hart treats the decline of class-consciousness as a given: class may not, however, have disappeared, but simply been felt and expressed differently.

The present article adopts another approach to understand the relationship between gender and class in the 1950s. It suggests that more complicated and less certain gender identities emerged at the work-place and in the home during this period. In this, femininity became less firmly tied to motherhood, while work gradually became accepted as a province of both men and women and masculinity was seen as reformed. This destabilized established understandings of working class masculinity and femininity. Thus, alongside changes in working class experience and outlook (such as the enjoyment of affluence and economic security), we might place significant changes in working class gender identities.

Gender also became a primary means of articulating changes in class identity in the 1950s. The sense of being working class had in the past been expressed through the male breadwinner ideal or the sanctified image of the working class

mother. Crucial to this was a strict sense of sex segregation. In the fifties, class could no longer easily be expressed in the same way, because such stereotypes and such segregation had less purchase in lived experience. Instead, observers of the working classes noted a growth in the number of married women workers, the decrease in family size, the increased companionability of working class marriages, and the emergence of an apparently reformed working class masculinity. Such changes were identified as central to a more general transformation of working class life in the fifties. They also made older gender and class stereotypes anachronistic. A distance opened up between lived experience, established discursive expressions of class identity and newer articulations of gender identity.

This gap was not, of course, without a sense of disruption. If changes in gender identities were identified with the emergence of a new working class in the fifties, gender also provided a language with which to register the discomfort provoked by this transformation. We might delineate two dominant modes of expression in this regard. The first is nostalgia. As Chris Waters has recently suggested, in post-war Britain, nostalgia became embedded in the conception of being working class.¹⁴ There is an important gendered element to this. In the 1950s a distinct and historically specific value was attached to the valorization of traditional gender stereotypes within the working classes. The example used in this article is the idealization of the working class mother. At a moment when such stereotypes might have had less resonance in lived experience, nostalgia for traditional, more certain and more fixed stereotypes of femininity (such as the working class mother) became more intense. Such nostalgia not only evoked the loss of particular gender identities, but also represented an elegy to an older class identity, the foundation of which comprised established ideas of masculine and feminine roles. The second mode is the celebration, particularly in fictional treatments of working class life, of an aggressive masculinity, one which stressed misogyny. If nostalgia might be perceived as a means to recapture a lost and more certain past working class identity, the expression of an aggressive masculinity was a backlash against the present with all its uncertainties about both class and gender.

The present article examines this question first by discussing changes in patterns of work and maternity for working class women in the fifties. It then uses texts of social observation and sociology such as *Coal is Our Life* (1956) and *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) to explore observations of working class family life and masculinity. It concludes with a brief examination of nostalgia and misogyny in a variety of texts, from Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) to literary and cinematic texts of the "Angry Young Men" and "social realist" movements. There are particular qualifications which guide this discussion. Some limitations have, first of all, been imposed upon its canvas: for the most part, it looks at texts published between 1950 and 1962. As well, this article is principally concerned with the discursive representation of gender within the working classes, but it does suggest that such representations had a relationship to material changes in working class life in the 1950s. Within the confines of the present examination, it is impossible to address in any detail one of the most important of those changes: the large-scale slum clearance and rehousing which helped transform the physical environment of life for many working-class people.¹⁵ Though changes in masculinity are considered, the ini-

tial focus is upon changes in femininity. This has particular purchase in relation to work and sexuality. Such changes were apprehended by some contemporaries as the catalysts for wider transformations of femininity, masculinity and family life. Finally, a qualification regarding the evidence must be made: unsurprisingly, contemporary works of sociology and social observation often helped constitute what they sought to discover—the shift in working-class life and identity. Placing this process in an historical context is one of the foci of the article; another is examining the ciphers produced by this literature as a means of understanding social change in the 1950s.

The article first considers changes in femininity with relationship to work and sexuality, then examines changing reflections upon masculinity and family life and concludes with a consideration of the cultural representation of changes in gender identities in the fifties.

II

In the formation and development of the British working classes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the articulation of class was often intertwined with gender.¹⁶ The ideal of the skilled, independent worker, for example, was not only the expression of a class ideal, but also a valorization of a particular gender ideology. Within such an ideology, femininity had to serve as a counterpoint to the male breadwinner: if work defined the gender and class identity of men, maternity did so for working class women. Domestic work in the private sphere, including maternity, rather than paid work in the public sphere was seen as the normative state of working class femininity.¹⁷ Of course, this was a discursive construction with did not always accord with lived experience, but it remained a powerful ideology, shaping, for example, wage negotiation, trade union development, and the political character of the Labour party.

Though they did not completely displace established understandings of gender and class within the working classes, the experience of war and unemployment in the first half of the twentieth-century were powerful catalysts in the confusion of gender identities. The dilution of male labour by female labour during the First World War left the identification between skilled work and masculinity less sure.¹⁸ Between the wars, the male breadwinner ideal was further undermined by unemployment, which fell disproportionately on male workers, while female workers saw their numbers rise in newer, light industries.¹⁹ Still, war and unemployment did not destroy the gender ideology underpinning the historical development of the British working classes. Wartime women's work was often coded as temporary and transgressive (even if patriotic), while unemployment actually enshrined sex segregation in its symbolic victims: the man-as-worker losing his self-respect from unemployment; the woman-as-mother struggling to make ends meet on the dole.²⁰ Nonetheless, we can certainly argue that, by 1939, established understandings of working class masculinity and femininity orbited more uncertainly around notions of work and maternity than they had earlier in the century.

The experience of a second total war between 1939 and 1945 served to confuse further the relationship among work, maternity and femininity. The exigencies of war demanded the idealization of traditional stereotypes, such as mother

and wife, while promoting newer and more disruptive figures, such as the mobile woman, the female worker and “pleasure-seeking women.”²¹ The woman as worker was a particular site of argument about gender roles. The mobilisation of women in industry and other war service beginning in 1941 offered up an innovative vision of active women, but one which nonetheless remained strictly within the boundaries of traditional gender ideologies.²² The celebrated blueprint for the post-war world, the Beveridge Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services, was, in gender terms, an ode to the pre-war world, grounded in the centrality of the male breadwinner and the marginality of the female worker; Beveridge envisioned women as primarily tied to the wheel of a “natural” and patriotic maternity.²³ In peace, the tension between work and maternity continued. While there was some falling off in employment in areas of traditional strength such as textiles, pottery, and clothing, increases were seen in the chemical industry, finance and utilities, as well as a growing trend toward part-time work and an older and married cohort of female workers.²⁴ The post-war labour shortage meant that the 1945 Labour government had to persuade women to work.²⁵ But, as Denise Riley has suggested, this renewed need for female labour in peacetime went hand in hand with pronatalist concerns, represented for example by the Royal Commission on Population of 1949. As Riley argues, neither war nor peace led to a radical interrogation of “the family, the state, the sexual division of labour,” leaving unclarified the distinction between women as mothers and women as workers.²⁶

Given these changes, we can therefore suggest that by the beginning of the 1950s, though a distinction between women’s work in the home and work in the public sphere continued to demarcate gender identities within the working classes—the normative remained the man as worker and the woman as non-working wife or mother—it did so in an increasingly unreliable fashion.

What of femininity and sexuality in the private sphere? It is obviously difficult to trace with any great certainty the impact of changes in sexuality and sexual outlook within the working classes before the 1950s, but we can suggest that the established understandings of femininity were also being disrupted in the private sphere.

The decline in the birth-rate in the early twentieth century is the key to this change. Between 1900 and 1950, the birth-rate in Britain dropped from 28.2 births per thousand to 16.2.²⁷ As the 1949 Royal Commission on Population stressed, this fall had one major cause—“the spread of deliberate family limitation”—and one primary site: working class women. The Royal Commission noted that the number of children in working class families had fallen from an average of 3.94 in all marriages occurring between 1900 and 1909 to 2.49 for marriages occurring between 1925 and 1929.²⁸ If, in the public sphere, the separation between femininity and work was becoming blurred, in the private sphere, the declining birth-rate suggested that the practice of contraception was separating sexuality from fertility, thus blurring, though not eliminating the connection between femininity and maternity. Of course this change occurred within the context of a more general liberalization in public attitudes about sexuality after the First World War.²⁹ But the spread of contraception and sexual knowledge had particular importance for working class women, given the threat of economic insecurity to working class households and the physical dangers of

child-bearing. The persistence of high levels of maternal morbidity and mortality in the thirties bore poignant witness to the latter; in 1938, the social scientist Richard Titmuss asserted, for example, that “the mother . . . is the chief sufferer during unemployment.”³⁰ Sexual knowledge was still scarce for working class women, as was access to effective contraception.³¹ Expanding such knowledge and extending contraceptive access rightly became a focus of working women’s organizations in the twenties and thirties.³² What becomes clear in this is not the abandonment of maternity within working class femininity, but its problematization. A more critical view of maternity emerged, in which the separation from fertility is not sexual liberation *per se* but a protection of domesticity. As with changes in work, developments in maternity rendered femininity more complex within the working classes before the fifties.

III

In the 1950s, there were continued changes in the relationship between femininity, work and sexuality. Let us first turn to work and femininity. Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein pointed out in 1956: “[t]he problem of ‘women and work’, and of women’s role in society generally, has completely changed its complexion during the last few decades.”³³ More impressionistic was the comment made by an older Bolton woman to the popular chronicler of working class life, Bill McNaughton:

“Another big change is the evening shift at the mills,” she went on. “You get ever so many housewives going off to work from half-past five to half-past nine of night. It seems a funny idea to me, but most of ‘em seem to like it. It gets ‘em out of the house, you see, an’ that’s what most housewives are in need of.”³⁴

Both statements were grounded in a material reality: the substantial increase in female labour in the 1950s and 1960s. There was, first of all, a significant increase in the number of female workers making up the total working population; in 1968, the female share of all civil employment stood at 37%, compared to a wartime high of 39.5% in 1943 [See figure 1]. A critical part of this change related to part-time work done by married women. While before the First World, less than 10% of married women had engaged in part-time work, by the sixties, approximately half of all married women held such positions.³⁵ In manufacturing industries, we can see, for example, a steady rise in the percentage of part-time against full-time female workers, from 11.8% in 1950 to 17.7% in 1968 [see figure 2]. In 1951, the married percentage of female workers stood at 15.3%; eight years later, it had risen to 18.7%. At the same time, part-time female workers were able to earn more. Very early in this development, writers in the fifties emphasized the importance changes in women’s work held for the transformation of working class life and gender identities. Comments from a 1962 study of women workers in Bermondsey, South London, are typical of this particular literature:

The working wife is not, of course, a new phenomenon: poverty has always driven some wives out to work; and all social classes have bred a scatter of originals who have elected to work outside the home because they have accepted the claims of some cause. What is different today is that the decision to work seems to be taken on an altogether different basis from that of dedication or simple necessity.

Figure 1
Female Workers: Percentage of Total Civil Employment, 1950–1968

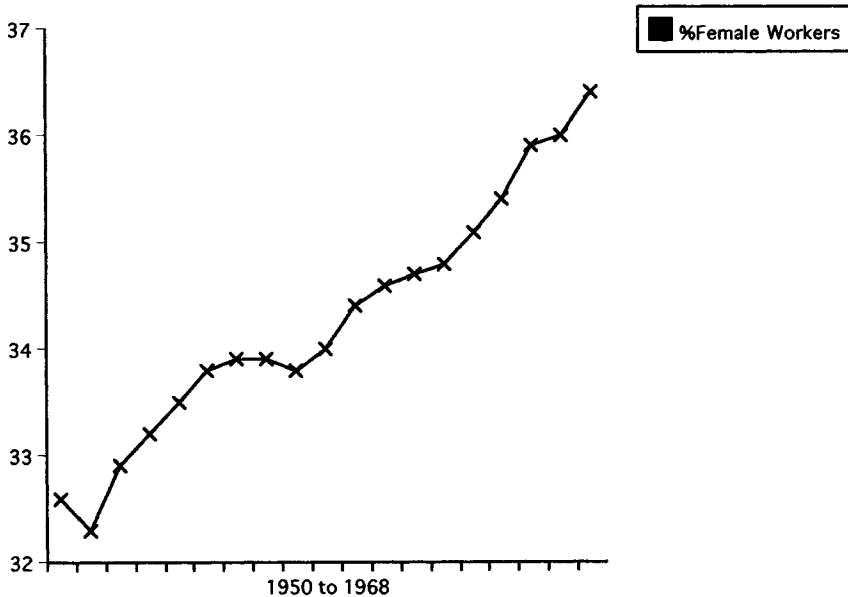


Chart adapted from figures in Department of Employment and Production, *British Labour Statistics: Historical Abstract 1886–1968* (London: HMSO, 1971).

Figure 2
Percentage of Female Workers Employed Part-Time in Manufacturing Industries, 1950–68

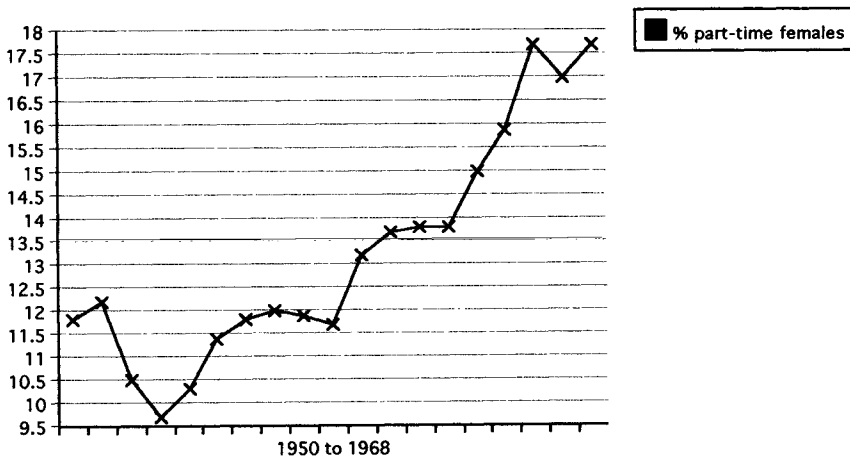


Chart adapted from figures in Department of Employment and Production, *British Labour Statistics: Historical Abstract 1886–1968* (London: HMSO, 1971).

Whatever the reasons for this decision many people see it as a challenge to society, because it breaks with long-established patterns of family life, and with the values and beliefs supporting them.³⁶

Ferdynand Zweig's *Women's Life and Labour* (1952) was an early example. Surveying over four hundred subjects in six workplaces (including mills, factories, potteries, and print works) across the country, Zweig offered an impressionistic portrait which emphasized the particular and uneven quality of class consciousness among women workers, as well as a growing sense of female autonomy.³⁷ Dismissing the suggestion that the growth of women at the workplace would "promote the androgynous type," he nonetheless argued that it would demand a substantial revision of gender ideology within working class homes, whether this touched upon the status of the non-working wife, birth control, or the division of domestic responsibilities.³⁸ Nine years later, Zweig revisited some of these themes. With more women combining family and work, he argued that the separation between the private and the public was becoming less clear. In particular, Zweig stated, women now had agency in choosing between home and work.³⁹

Others also suggested the transformative character of an expanding female work force. In *Women's Two Roles* (1956), Klein and Myrdal remarked that the increased presence of women in the workplace represented a revolution in two stages, "the admission of women to an increasing variety of hitherto 'masculine' jobs" and "the endeavour of a growing number of women to combine family and employment."⁴⁰ What they pointed to was a more complicated femininity which embraced, rather than separated work and maternity. An important aspect of this was a more complicated idea of maternity itself, in which part-time work was not anti-maternal, but a way of fulfilling maternal responsibilities more effectively. The authors of *Woman, Wife and Worker* (1960) suggested changes in the patterns of women's work were often "said to threaten the stability of the family and is often cited as the main cause of separation, divorce and juvenile delinquency," but they showed that, for the objects of their study—the 3000 women workers at the Peek Frean biscuit factory in Bermondsey—the family remained central to their interests.⁴¹ "[T]here was nothing to indicate . . . they took their domestic responsibilities less seriously than did earlier generations," while work itself served the end of enhancing family life:

For most women the aim was a higher standard of living for their families. What they meant by a higher standard varied, but much of their earnings went on refurbishing and redecorating their homes, a more varied diet and the durable "consumer goods," furniture, bedding, grates, television sets and, for some, a small second-hand car. It also went on better clothing for the whole family, and pocket money and toys for the children. . . . Work was undertaken as a means of helping the family, not as an escape from it.⁴²

In part, this was offered as reassurance to those who feared the undermining of traditional gender roles; in part it bore witness to a much more complex femininity than could be contained by traditional gender ideology, one which reconciled maternity and paid work outside the home.

It also marked new form of identification between femininity and class. An extended version of the Bermondsey study completed two years later argued that

married women's employment had not destroyed the working class family, but ushered in a new kind of working class domesticity, one buttressed by a new balance within the family between husband, wife and children, and buoyed up by material improvements:

[The women] gave the impression from their interviews of being energetic and resourceful individuals, living the busiest of lives, much helped in their domestic affairs by co-operative husbands and by sensibly-brought-up children. They appeared to devote their extra income largely to their well-kept and efficient-looking homes, to more ample meals, better clothes and shoes, and a holiday away. In all this they kept the children's welfare very closely in mind. . . . [F]ew showed signs of the problems generally associated with married women's employment.⁴³

In this, the working wife and mother became a cipher of the new working classes, a complex symbol tying together domesticity and affluence, worlds of work, home and leisure. A similar picture of this new working class, one partly based upon a new kind of femininity can also be found in a 1954 study of a Sheffield housing estate:

It is interesting to note that some of the best kept homes are those of young housewives who have themselves come from large families, but intend to keep their own family small. Their children are lavishly cared for and are the focus of the home, and their husbands are much more domesticated and home-centred than those of the previous generation. A couple aged about thirty were, for instance, living in a house of this kind at the bottom of the estate. Both were working and ploughing their earnings back into the home and into comforts for their only child. In the front room there was a television set on which stood a cocktail shaker and glasses (apparently never used), a new dining suite and new armchairs. The standard range had been replaced by a tiled fireplace. Neither husband nor wife drank, and they never went to the pictures as they did not want to leave their son in anyone else's charge.⁴⁴

Elizabeth Roberts has argued that this period of women's work was a "truly transitional phase," but, because of the surfeit of wages in the affluent 1950s, the power accorded to a wife and mother to make the best of a tight budget became more irrelevant, thus eroding her status. At the same time, because a woman's wages were "seen as contributing to the less important 'extras' in family life" such as consumer goods, rather than staples, those wages were devalued within the family.⁴⁵ Both contemporary impressions and historical interpretations suggest a new form of femininity in working class life, with different meanings for the construction of class identity.

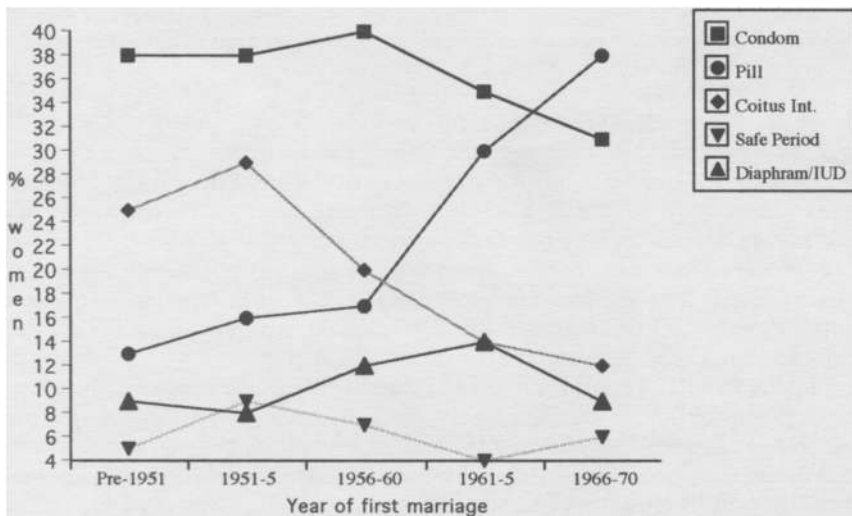
Smaller families were also a feature of the new landscape of gender and class. Though the birth rate recovered marginally in this period (from 14.6 births per thousand in 1940 to 16.2 in 1950 and 17.5 in 1960), the use of traditional and newer contraceptive methods continued to increase within working class families in the 1950s.⁴⁶ As Richard Titmuss remarked in 1958, "[a] reduction of such magnitude in only two generations in the time devoted to childbearing represents nothing less than a revolutionary enlargement of freedom for women brought about by the power to control their own fertility," marking the eclipse of an older working class woman "tied . . . to the wheel of childbearing."⁴⁷ The

public climate of the post-war period also encouraged wider acceptance of contraception. The number of family planning clinics grew from sixty-one in 1938 to four hundred in 1963. In 1958, the Church of England accepted family planning within the context of Christian marriage. By the mid-fifties, there were indications of greater use of more reliable contraceptive methods, such as diaphragms, for instance; the appearance of the Pill in 1961 further reduced the reliance upon coitus interruptus and the 'safe' period [see figure 3].

For working class women of the 1950s, the main value of contraception was as a defence against economic insecurity. In their 1951 survey of four hundred urban working class subjects, Eliot Slater and Maya Woodside remarked, "[p]eople do not want large families and large families are firmly associated in their minds with poverty, hardship and the lowering of standards."⁴⁸ The women of Ferdynand Zweig's 1952 study shared a determination to practice contraception. This was particularly clear among younger women, who often felt "the need to mark their disagreement with the past, with the bad experience of their childhood" by avoiding "marrying carelessly and haphazardly" or cherishing an "ambition to show that they can lead a 'good life.'"⁴⁹

Did the separation of sexuality from fertility also imply a growing importance of sexual pleasure for working class women? Some contemporaries did characterize the post-war liberalization of contraception as being principally about freer sexuality. This was usually regarded with regret, rather than celebration. In 1951, Seebohm Rowntree and G.R. Lavers, for example, lamented "the decay of

Figure 3
Methods of Birth Control, 1951-70



Percentage of women using various methods of contraception, by year of first marriage. Please note: Percentages do not necessarily add up to 100, with use of multiple methods. As well, 'Pill' usage before 1961 refers to abortifacients. Chart adapted from M. Bone, *Family Planning Services in England and Wales* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 19.

absolute standards, following on the decline of religious belief . . . people have tended to say of sexual promiscuity 'What after all is the harm?' . . . In the large majority of cases it is a purely animal satisfaction . . . an obsessional activity."⁵⁰ In his 1956 study of *The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationships of the English-woman*, Eustace Chesser suggested that pre-marital sex had increased. Of women born before 1904, 18.5% had experienced sexual intercourse before marriage. For women born between 1924 and 1934 (in other words, women who would be in their twenties and thirties in the 1940s and 1950s), this had risen to 43% of married women and 30% of single women.⁵¹ Against such contemporary portraits which implied increasingly free sexuality among women, recent scholarship has stressed instead the continued importance of sexual respectability for working class women.⁵² Writing in 1971, after the tumult of the sixties, Geoffrey Gorer observed that modern sexual 'permissiveness' had not displaced more traditional institutions such as monogamous marriage.⁵³ Sexual knowledge continued to be a rare commodity; even in the sixties, for example, a third of working class girls were without sex education until the age of fourteen.⁵⁴

But we might still venture that the separation of sexuality from fertility and a more liberal climate about sexuality did lead to higher expectations of heterosexual relationship and, in particular, marriage.⁵⁵ Though the evidence is much less clear than that surrounding the economic consequences of pregnancy, it does seem that active and fulfilling sexual lives were increasingly perceived by women as crucial to companionate marriages and relationships. Active, non-procreative sexuality was viewed not only as reconcilable with economic security and good health but as a normative element of modern femininity and domesticity and particularly as a central component of a successful marriage.⁵⁶ In the late forties, a poll done by Mass-Observation found that only a third of those questioned felt that "a good sex life was essential to happiness."⁵⁷ A poll done twenty years later showed that 67% of all women sampled, and 65% of all men believed that sex was "very important."⁵⁸

In sum, changes in work and sexuality had inscribed the category of working class femininity and maternity with new experiences and expectations, such as work in the public sphere, the limitation of families, and the possibility of sexual pleasure separated from fertility. Both lived experience and the discourse of literature on women's work in the fifties brought out these changes to working class femininity.

IV

Many studies of working class life in the fifties emphasized that changes in gender identities were central to a more general transformation of the working classes. Such changes rested not only upon femininity, but upon masculinity as well, and the broader relations between men and women. Before discussing this, it is important not to overstate the sense of disruption or change within working class communities, particularly in terms of gender. There were accounts which emphasized the maintenance of the status quo. In her study of twenty London families between 1950 and 1953, seven of which were working class, Elizabeth Bott noted little change over time in gender relations. The Newbolts, a working class couple from Bermondsey demonstrated a significant amount of conjugal

separation in social life and domestic work, a feature Bott suggested was also notable in other working class couples.⁵⁹ Similarly, among the working classes of post-war Banbury, Margaret Stacey noted a sharp segregation between a male world of work and trade union and a more conservative (even Conservative) female world of the home and family.⁶⁰

But other studies did suggest significant shifts in gender identities as they related to work, sexuality, and the home. Some pointed to the reform of masculinity and the appearance of more companionable marriages. In both *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) by Young and Willmott and Ferdynand Zweig's *The Worker in Affluent Society* (1961), a "new man" emerged from the observation of the affluent working classes, one who was not only less opposition-minded to society and more confident in his work, but increasingly domesticated and even, according to Zweig, feminized:

Somehow related to this is the process of softening in the worker, I would venture to call it his feminization. The worker's world was formerly known for its masculinity. . . . Now he has mellowed considerably. . . . The women around him imbue him with feminine values. He accepts his wife as his companion on more or less equal terms, especially when she goes out to work and earns her own living. . . . All this means that the worker is moving away from his mates.⁶¹

In their study of Bethnal Green, East London, and the suburban London housing estate of "Greenleigh," Young and Willmott pointed to a similarly profound sea-change in working class masculinity, away from the public world of work and a private sphere of male authority and exploitation, toward a world in which gender equality was increasingly accepted:

. . . the old style of working-class family is fast disappearing. The husband portrayed by previous social investigation is no longer true to life. In place of the old comes a new kind of companionship between man and woman, reflecting the rise in status of the young wife and children which is one of the great transformations of our time. There is now a nearer approach to equality between the sexes and, though each has a peculiar role, its boundaries are no longer so rigidly defined nor is it performed without consultation.⁶²

Three years later, Willmott and Young reasserted that "[i]n place of the traditional working class husband, as mean with his money as he was callous in sex, forcing a trial of unwanted babies upon his wife, has come the man who wheels the pram on Saturday mornings."⁶³ In part, this was about rehousing and geographic change; a transformation of gender roles was associated with the new working classes of the new housing estates, as if one form of gender ideology had been left behind in the back-to-back houses. In a comparative study of slum and estate dwellers in Oxford in the fifties, J.M. Moge suggested that with the move from an older working class community to a newer one came "a new set of expectations." The strict sexual division of the slum-dwelling family became a "companionship type of family on the estate."⁶⁴ But it is important not to exaggerate the geographic aspects of this shift. Even in the "old" community of Bethnal Green, Young and Willmott found changes in masculinity, particularly in the patterns of male kinship in work: with full employment, sons following fathers into particular trades became less important.⁶⁵

Young, Willmott, Zweig and Mogeys suggested that changes in gender identities had, for the most part, occurred harmoniously. Other accounts were less sanguine about the facility of the change. The authors of *Coal is Our Life* (1956), investigating the traditional mining community of "Ashton" in the West Riding of Yorkshire between 1952 and 1954, found the continuity of an established gender order, albeit with substantial disruption occurring within that order. Ashton had long been a working class community of definite gender divisions, where men not only occupied an exclusive public world of the pit and the pub, but also achieved their masculinity in this world: "[t]o take his place in the community, to share the continued friendship and co-activity of his boyhood friends, a young man cannot for long stay outside of mining."⁶⁶ A strict division of space and labour marked out the borders between feminine and masculine, with a woman achieving femininity within the private sphere: "[a] woman fulfils herself in keeping her home clean and tidy, her family healthy and well fed."⁶⁷ Sexuality was an example of this division, with men limiting talk about sex to the pit.⁶⁸

Post-1945 Ashton nonetheless witnessed a gradual change in these gender identities. This was less about female employment (work remained scarce for women) than about changing sexual mores and, in particular, higher expectations by women of sex and marriage:

Since the war the emphasis on "sex" rather than "love" and "romance" has increased and become more open. Weekly magazines of a certain type are widely read by young women as well as men, and in these "sex-appeal" is very deliberately cultivated. The trend in films and in the increasingly popular American pulp novelette is towards pornography and sex as part of a whole picture of violence. Women are as directly influenced by these developments as their brothers, boyfriends and husbands. A woman who was thirty in 1953 was very different in her attitudes, derived from her reading and film-going experiences, towards sex, and towards men, from her counterpart in adolescence in that year. All this can only tend to make the attitude of mind of girls towards sex approximate to that of the young men in the sense of seeing it more as something in and for itself.⁶⁹

Though the authors portrayed this change in critical terms, they also acknowledged that it presented a more complex femininity at odds with "an ideology [in which] women can only be objects of lust, mothers and domestic servants."⁷⁰ A particular site of growing conflict was within marriage:

Very few women stated real satisfaction with their sex lives. In other cases women complained of their husband's selfishness in not considering the woman's complete satisfaction. The widespread practice of withdrawal as a measure of birth control can only detract from the likelihood of female orgasm. These conditions combine with the traditional reticence in open discussion and expression between the sexes in such matters to make many women feel "cold" in their marital relations.⁷¹

While *Coal is Our Life* was one of the few texts of social observation which stressed the persistence of working class political and economic attitudes against "the ideological dream-world of 'affluent societies', 'embourgeoisement', and 'the institutionalization of conflict', " its authors did see changes in gender roles and ideas of sexuality that "threaten the persistence of the family structure and ideology to which the Ashton of old gave rise."⁷² Changes in gender identity

(and particularly in femininity) were more important in shifting class identity in Ashton than other factors such as the public ownership of the mines or affluence.

Despite their disparate arguments, Young, Willmott, Zweig and the authors of *Coal is Our Life* had common elements. All approached the working-classes seeking to find changes wrought by post-war reform and affluence. All linked changes in class experience and identity in the fifties to changes in gender experience and identity; in this, changes in working-class gender were perceived not only as having a basis in material life, but also as a means of speaking more generally about changes in working-class outlook. If being working class was gradually being detached from established social, economic and political nodes (such as the experience of insecurity, tenement housing, antagonism to employers, or voting Labour), it was also being detached from established understandings of sexual order, in which women and men were clearly separated and masculinity and (in particular) femininity were inscribed in disparate ways.

V

The interweaving of changes in the bases of class and gender identity in the fifties opened up a gap between lived experience and the construction of gender and class identity. As the authors of *Coal is Our Life* argued, this undermined a traditional fundament of working class identity. For this reason, gender became a principal means of expressing a sense of loss or antagonism at this change.

Nostalgia for older and simpler constructions of working class femininity, particularly working class mothers, was an important trope in this regard. The figure of the mother as the stable and essential foundation of the working class home and family is an enduring feature of working class autobiography and the sociology of the working classes in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. After 1945, the idealized image of what the novelist Alan Sillitoe called “‘Good owd mam’” lost none of its importance in discussions and representations of working class community, even though the experience of working class maternity had changed.⁷³ Indeed, it might be argued that such nostalgia became all the more intense because working class maternity had changed in terms of work and sexuality.

Sociological studies of working class communities in the midst of post-war change emphasised the importance of traditional feminine roles in such communities. In 1957, for instance, summarizing their study of changes in housing in East London, Young and Willmott told the *New Scientist* that “the most significant thing . . . is the importance of Mum—the Mother Goddess of Bethnal Green. Mum is the oracle whose word is law in everything from babies’ dummies [pacifiers] to dockers’ dinners.”⁷⁴ Peter Townsend’s study of old people similarly noted that “[i]t was chiefly Mum they [grown children] visited and Mum they supported, materially and emotionally.”⁷⁵ Various interviewees in *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) noted the centrality of the mother to the integrity of working class families and kinship networks; “[i]t all broke up when Mum died” was a familiar lament.⁷⁶ Madeleine Kerr’s account of working class life in the fifties similarly stressed that “[t]he most salient feature which all Ship Street people have, whether male or female, is this incredibly strong tie to their mother.”⁷⁷ In Ashton, the “one trace of sentimentality” among miners was reserved for their

mothers.⁷⁸ The mother was, in this regard, a guarantor of continuity, not just of the family, but of a particular kind of class identity. At a point when both class and gender might have seemed unstable, nostalgic evocations of a traditional mother figure evinced a reassuring stability, a vision of an unchanged world of class and gender, one captured in the imagination, if not in lived experience in the fifties and sixties.

The Uses of Literacy (1957), Richard Hoggart's influential paean to traditional working class culture, offers an important example of this gendered nostalgia. The broad contemporary context of Hoggart's work was the erosion of working class identity by the "hedonistic-group-individualism" lurking within the affluence and material security of the 1950s.⁷⁹ Mass culture and affluence had made British society "culturally classless," wearing away the "older, the more narrow but also more genuine class culture."⁸⁰ *The Uses of Literacy* was an elegy for pre-war working class communities. Hoggart's antagonism and nostalgia were mediated through a language which emphasised that the public identity of class was grounded in the private sphere: "[t]he more we look at working class life, the more we try to reach the core of working-class attitudes, the more surely it does appear that that core is a sense of the personal, the concrete, the local: it is embodied in the idea of, first, the family and, second, the neighbourhood."⁸¹ For Hoggart, as it had been for Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), class identity was found in a highly gendered interior, one in which husband and wife were present, albeit with different roles, one in which 'work' was the realm of the woman:

This is in many respects a good and comely life, one founded on care, affection, a sense of the small group if not of the individual. It is elaborate and disorderly and yet sober: it is not chintzy or kittenish or whimsical or "feminised." The father is a part of the inner life of the home, not someone who spends most of his time miles away earning the money to keep the establishment going: the mother is the working-centre, always with too much to do and with her thoughts revolving almost entirely around the life of this family room.⁸²

In this picture, the mother figure was "the pivot of the house . . . [s]he, more than the father holds [the family together]"; the sub-text was that such women were also the pivot of traditional working class identity.⁸³ Hoggart paid an often sentimental tribute to the sacrifices of mothers, marked by "the lines on the face of an old working-class woman".⁸⁴ But *The Uses of Literacy* also portrayed the older woman as a reminder of an older, more cohesive working class, uncompromised by the rise of affluence and consumerism or changing patterns of female work. By contrast with trends in the fifties, for example, Hoggart's woman worked strictly within the bounds of the private sphere. She was invariably an older woman whose work had not been made easier by the growing proliferation of household appliances and consumer goods.⁸⁵ There was also an asexual quality to her. Hoggart remarks, for example: "[i]t is evident that a working-class mother will age early, that at thirty, after having two or three children, she will have lost most of her sexual attraction; that between thirty-five and forty she rapidly becomes the shapeless figure the family know as 'our mam'".⁸⁶ In this, the working class woman could only be recognised as "'our mam'" once she had become "shapeless"; in other words, she could only be used as a cipher for the integrity of

the working class home once her period of active sexuality has passed and when her identity is perceived to have become less complex. Hoggart's female cipher of working class identity left little room for a more complex femininity. The importance of this gendered image to an evocation of an older and more certain class identity also comes through his dismissal of younger feminine characters. Teenage girls became ciphers for the rootlessness and cheapness of the age of affluence; like modern 'classless' culture, they are "flighty, careless and inane. . . [e]verything they choose to do seems urban and trivial."⁸⁷ Hoggart thus used gender to articulate his antagonism to the emergence of a new sense of class.

Nostalgia for older forms of femininity was one response to the emergence of newer forms of gender identities. Studies of the two major literary and cinematic movements of the fifties and early sixties, those of "social realism" and the "Angry Young Men," have suggested that there was another response: the emergence of a voice of aggressive masculinity, whose main characteristic was often misogyny.⁸⁸ In part, this was a backlash to the complexity of gender roles in the fifties, not least as a reaction to the complexity of femininity. In part, as Lynne Segal has argued, it was a response to post-war masculinity itself, particularly the apparent feminization or domestication of this masculinity.⁸⁹ But it was also a reaction to the loss or dislocation of class identity and an attempt to replace that class identity with a more assertive, if acerbic masculinity. Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), is a well-known example. Jimmy is a sweet-stall operator and Sunday afternoon intellectual. Though lower class and anti-establishment, Jimmy flounders without a sure class identity or a great cause. His response to this "endless Sunday afternoon" of discontent is to lash out at his upper middle-class wife, Alison. For Jimmy, misogyny becomes a substitute for class struggle; an abusive and aggressive masculinity becomes a replacement for a lost class identity. Importantly, the one female figure for whom Jimmy has unqualified respect is Mrs Tanner, the older woman who gave him the sweet-stall, a woman whom, as Alison says: "Jimmy insists on calling working class. A Charwoman who married an actor, worked hard all her life, and spent most of it struggling to support her husband and her son."⁹⁰ Only a traditional working class mother figure remains undefiled for Jimmy, because her class and gender identity is fixed, a clear contrast to the complexity of the other women around him. While male working class writers such as Sid Chaplin continued to idealise working class mothers as "always good and generous," younger women and, in particular, sexually active women were viewed either with confusion or criticism.⁹¹ In some of these texts, however, motherhood itself becomes muddled by affluence and sexuality. In Tony Richardson's film version of Alan Sillitoe's *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), the protagonist's mother becomes a cipher, not for stability, but for the betrayal of working class ideals. She is identified with materialism and the corrosive force of working class affluence, spending the compensation money from her husband's death on furniture and clothes, including a television and a leopard-skin coat. She is also a sexual figure, suggestively testing out a new mattress. Her son symbolically burns a pound note in front of a photograph of his father, the last unsullied working class hero.

What becomes clear in all of these texts is a confusion and anger at the loss of both traditional gender identities (in particular, traditional femininities) and class identity—the misogyny of a Jimmy Porter exists in the no man's land of class

and gender identity in the fifties. They are working class heroes unsure of their class identity or their heroism. Later studies of popular sub-cultures also stressed that violence and strict gender separation became a reaction to the loss of an older class identity which had similarly rested upon such sex segregation.⁹² The desire for a clear working-class masculinity can be seen in other spheres, though without the misogyny. Of the emergence of the British New Left in the late 1950s, Raphael Samuel reflected for example: "we romanticised the working-class male hero as the hope for the future."⁹³ The statement is an interesting one, not least because it hinted at the valorization of a figure of certain class identity at exactly the moment when that identity was assumed to be losing its significance in the welter of affluence.

VI

An explanation of the intensity of such cultural representations—whether of nostalgia or gender antagonism—might be found in the intersection between gender and class identity. This article has attempted to show the relationship between the two in the 1950s. Through changes in work and sexuality, the period witnessed a growing complexity of femininity, whether seen in the increased number of women working or in the spread of family limitation. Contemporary literature on working women promoted the idea that this was reshaping the public and private spheres of working class life. At the same time, sociologists observed changes in masculinity and in expectations of domesticity and marriage. This discourse similarly suggested that gender ideology had become more complex within the working classes. Just as the physical landscape of working class life may have changed, from back to back housing to suburban estates, the sexual landscape of working class life was also changing. The male and female figures in that landscape may not have had the same meaning as workers, mothers, husbands and wives as they had in previous generations. Thus the discourse of transformation in working class life in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s was often bound up in the perception of change in gender roles. This reminds us of the persistent interweaving of gender and class identity in mid-twentieth-century Britain. It also presents us with a moment of considerable complexity in the history of working class identity in Britain, a moment of disruption when, to borrow a phrase of Carolyn Steedman, "the central interpretive devices of the culture don't work."⁹⁴ This may be less about the death of class in Britain than its rearticulation.

Department of History
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3

ENDNOTES

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56. See the historical development of this in the 1940s, in Marilyn Lake, "Female Desires: The Meaning of World War 2," *Australian Historical Studies* 21/95 (October 1990): 267–84; Gillian Swanson, "‘So Much Money and So Little to Spend It On’: Morale, Consumption and Sexuality," in Gledhill and Swanson (editors), *Nationalising Femininity*, pp. 70–90.
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81. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
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