

From *North & South* to Reality:

Class Conflict During the British Industrial Revolution

Abstract:*North & South* vividly portrays the acute class conflicts within British society during the Industrial Revolution. This paper will be dedicated to examining the development, causes, and impacts of this phenomenon. The statements and analyses in this paper are based on statistical data, historical facts, and previous research.

Keywords:class conflict,industrial revolution,stratification

1. Introduction

North & South is a film that depicts the social contradictions of 19th-century Britain during the Industrial Revolution. The story revolves around Margaret, the daughter of a Southern clergyman, and Thornton, a factory owner in the industrial city of Milton in the North. Margaret moves from the idyllic South to the industrially smog-filled North, witnessing the suffering of the working class and the exploitation by capitalists. The film, through the love story of Margaret and Thornton, showcases the sharp class conflicts. Following the onset of the Industrial Revolution, class conflicts in Britain intensified, profoundly affecting the subsequent political structure and social development of the country. There are many studies focusing on single aspects of class conflict during this period, but few studies explore the significant value of class conflict in driving social progress in the UK, considering British cultural characteristics and historical context. Therefore, this paper attempts to use the film *North&South* as an inspiration and illustration to better understand this significance.

2. Retrospection

This section will conduct a retrospective analysis of class conflict during the Industrial Revolution. It will introduce the basic information and historical progression of class conflict during this period, from the portrayal of class struggle in

the film *North & South* to its reality.

2.1 Acute Class Conflict: From *North & South* to Reality

In *North & South*, the acute class conflict is vividly illustrated through the interactions and opposing perspectives of the characters. As representatives of the factory owner class, Mr. Thornton and Mrs. Thornton believe their management style is fair, while they view the workers' demands for higher wages as excessively greedy. They see the strikes as rebellious actions that aim to overthrow the social order, an attempt by workers to replace the masters and invert the existing hierarchy.

On the other hand, the workers, led by Nicholas Higgins, feel exploited and oppressed by the industrial capitalists. They believe the factory owners are overly greedy, enriching themselves at the expense of the workers, who struggle to survive on meager wages. Higgins is determined not to return to work until the workers' demands are met, highlighting the desperation and resolve of the working class.

This mutual perception of greed and injustice on both sides makes the conflict exceptionally sharp and unavoidable. The factory owners' refusal to compromise and the workers' steadfast demands for better conditions create an environment ripe for inevitable clashes. The film effectively captures the essence of class conflict during the Industrial Revolution, where economic disparities and opposing viewpoints led to profound and often violent confrontations, reflecting the broader acute social class struggles of this time.

2.2 Historical progression

Since the inception of the Industrial Revolution, class conflict has been continuously evolving and intensifying, driven by many unfair laws and government policies. The tensions between the working class and capitalists lead to numerous protests, uprisings, and reforms, which have not only spurred social progress but also prompted significant legislative and policy changes. The following table presents a succinct overview of the historical progression of class conflict in the UK from the early stages of the Industrial Revolution to the late 19th century, providing a panoramic view of this historical process.

Time Period	Stage Characteristics	Key Events
Late 18th Century -- Early 19th Century	Early Industrial Revolution and Initial Conflicts	The Enclosure Movement involved the privatization of common land, displacing rural populations and creating a labor force for factories. This displacement contributed to class conflict, as many were forced to work in harsh conditions in industrial cities. <i>The 1815 Corn Laws</i> imposed high tariffs on imported grain, benefiting landowners but harming the working class by keeping grain prices high. This led to widespread protest and increased poverty, highlighting the divide between landowners and the working class, and fueling social unrest.
Early 19th Century	Development and Intensification of Conflicts	As the Industrial Revolution deepened, the living conditions of the working class gradually deteriorated, and social tensions continued to intensify. In 1824, the British government lifted the ban on union activities, legalizing strikes and allowing workers to organize protests, which paved the way for numerous protests and uprisings, such as the Bristol Riots of 1831. In 1832, <i>the Reform Act</i> was passed, expanding the political rights of the industrial bourgeoisie, allowing them to enact laws that furthered their own interests, which exacerbated class tensions.
Early 19th Century -- Late 19th Century	Reform and progress	The struggles of the workers and the acute class conflicts ultimately brought about change. A series of legislative measures were introduced to improve the conditions of the working class: the emergence of <i>the People's Charter</i> in the 1840s advocated for political

		reforms, including universal suffrage and secret ballots; the repeal of <i>the Corn Laws</i> in 1846 lowered grain prices; <i>the Factory Act</i> of 1847 regulated working hours; <i>the Trade Union Act</i> of 1871 legalized trade unions and protected workers' rights to collective bargaining...
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3. Reasons for Class Conflict During the British Industrial Revolution

Class conflict is a complex social phenomenon. The reasons for this conflict during the British Industrial Revolution are multifaceted and complex. This section will analyze the causes of class conflict during this period from three perspectives. Nonetheless, there may be other factors that contribute to this phenomenon as well.

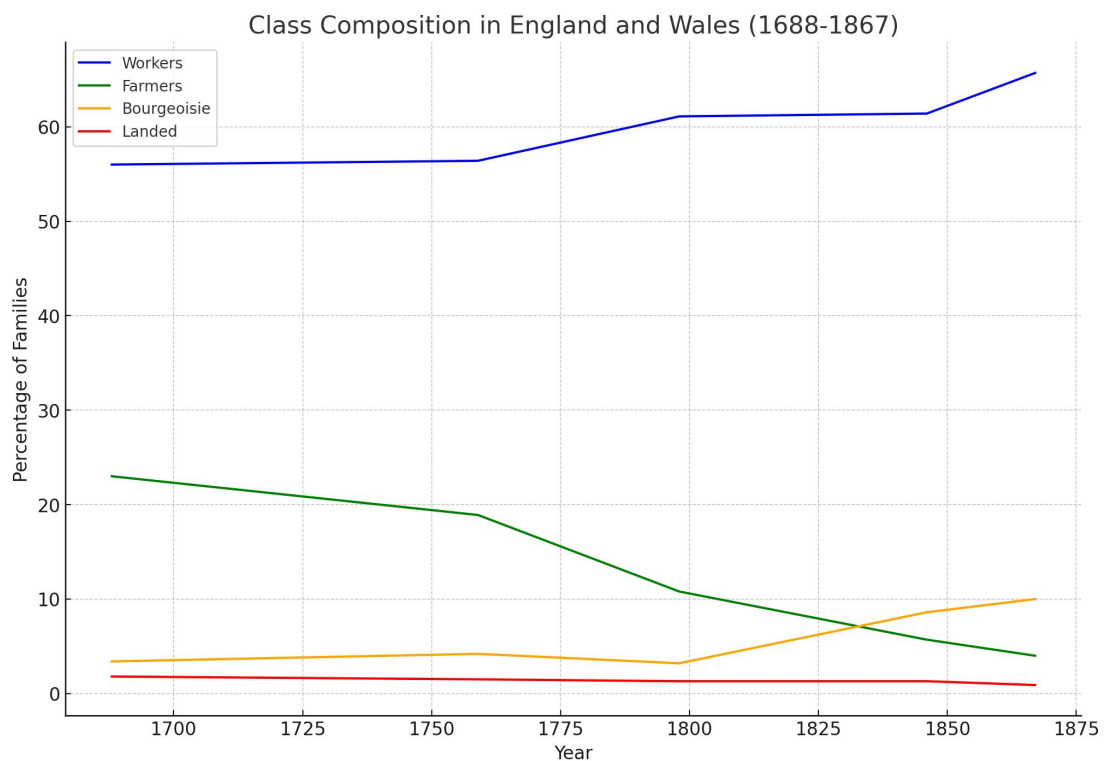
3.1 Complex Classes Relations Arising from Productivity Development

Under the wave of the Industrial Revolution, the development of productivity profoundly changed the social class structure. The fate of the weaver class is particularly typical. Before the invention of the spinning jenny, many weavers engaged in agriculture, maintaining their livelihood by cultivating small plots of land. However, the advent of the spinning jenny significantly reduced the cost of yarn production, leading to a decrease in the price of cloth and a substantial increase in market demand for cloth. In response, weavers gradually abandoned agriculture and focused on the weaving industry to earn more income.

The invention of machinery not only turned these part-time agricultural weavers into proletarians but also facilitated the emergence of an agricultural proletariat. After weavers abandoned agriculture, much land was left idle, providing opportunities for new large tenant farmers. These tenant farmers leased large tracts of land, engaged in large-scale operations, and increased land productivity. Their agricultural products were cheaper than those of small self-sustaining farmers, causing many small farmers to struggle to make a living. As a result, they had to sell their land, buy spinning jennies or looms, or work as short-term laborers for large tenant farmers, thus

becoming rural proletarians.

While creating the proletariat, the Industrial Revolution also gave rise to the industrial bourgeoisie. A small portion of this industrial bourgeoisie emerged from the noble landlord class. In the past, they only cared about their land income. However, after the Industrial Revolution began, they realized that running factories was more profitable, so they also started establishing factories.



Notes:

source:Economic History Review(reference 2)

The speed of social change clearly could not keep up with the emergence of new class relations, and workers at the time bore much of the cost of these changes. The first generation of urban workers in northern England found themselves on the fringes of history. They were cut off from the old system of "noblesse oblige"—an unreliable system, but one where rural workers could still expect some charity from landlords. However, they were not yet protected by the laws that now constitute the welfare state.

To survive, workers had no choice but to endure the exploitation of factory owners, accepting extremely low wages and harsh working conditions that severely damaged their health. In 1842, the average life expectancy of the upper class in Liverpool was 45 years. For merchants and prosperous artisans, it was 22 years, while workers, laborers, and general employees had an average life expectancy of only 15 years. The children of workers, unable to withstand the harsh living conditions, had mortality rates in some areas as high as 55%. Consequently, class conflicts became increasingly acute.

3.2 The Imbalance of Political Power Distribution

The Industrial Revolution enabled the bourgeoisie to accumulate increasing amounts of wealth, leading them to seek greater political power. Through a series of political reforms, the bourgeoisie gradually enhanced their political influence, ultimately gaining significant control within the political system. The Reform Act of 1832 marked the beginning of this process, redistributing parliamentary seats to give representation to emerging industrial cities. The Reform Act of 1867 further expanded the electorate, granting voting rights to more middle-class men. By 1884, the Third Reform Act nearly universalized suffrage for all adult men, significantly heightening the political influence of the bourgeoisie. The table below illustrates the impact of these political reforms on the political rights of different classes.

Class Period	Nobility	Bourgeoisie	Working Class
Before 1800	Complete control of parliament and government, holding all political rights and actual control	Very limited suffrage, political influence and actual control restricted to wealthy men	Almost no political rights or actual control
1832 <i>Reform Act</i>	Retained most power, but industrial towns	Middle-class men gained more suffrage,	Few wealthy workers gained suffrage,

	gained parliamentary seats, starting to lose some actual control	began to significantly influence politics, gradually increasing actual control in parliament	overall influence and actual control still very limited
1867 <i>Reform Act</i>	Continued to hold influence, but actual control further reduced	More middle-class men gained suffrage, occupied more seats in parliament, significantly increasing actual control	Large numbers of working-class men gained suffrage for the first time, political status improved, but actual control still limited
1884 <i>Reform Act</i>	Power further diminished, actual control weakened	Nearly all middle-class men gained suffrage, fully dominated the political stage, actual control further consolidated	Rural and urban working-class men widely gained suffrage, increased political participation, but actual control remained low

Due to this unequal distribution of political power, the bourgeoisie utilized their control to suppress the proletariat through the state's coercive machinery and enacted laws that favored their own interests. For instance, legislation such as *the Factory Acts* and *the Poor Laws* superficially limited working hours and living conditions but primarily served to maintain the workers' most basic quality of life without considering their welfare, thus clearly favoring the economic interests of the bourgeoisie. This legal framework's bias led to growing dissatisfaction and resistance among the working class, intensifying class conflicts. Workers not only had to endure

harsh working conditions and low wages but also faced political oppression and violent suppression from the bourgeoisie. These factors combined to exacerbate social instability, forcing the proletariat to struggle under the dual pressures of economic exploitation and political oppression.

3.3 Cultural and Religious Ideological Transformation

The Industrial Revolution brought about the development of the capitalist economic system, with the bourgeoisie advocating for free markets and private property rights, emphasizing individual success and competition. This ideology sharply contrasted with the traditional aristocracy's emphasis on feudal morals and a sense of responsibility, which included the protection and charity towards the lower classes. This shift in the ruling classes' ideologies, from the old to the new, meant that the lower classes could no longer rely on the upper classes for even minimal protection and support, leading to profound cultural changes in society. Bourgeois new ideology sharply opposed the working class's pursuit of equality and social justice, leading to profound cultural changes in society. The two major social classes each held opposing ideologies, clashing and creating intense class conflicts.

Before the Victorian era, Christian faith was the treasure of people's lives. From a young age, people revered God and devoutly listened to and read the Bible. However, the rapid advancement of science and technology brought by industrial civilization not only enhanced people's understanding of the material world but also changed their spiritual beliefs. Various anti-traditional new thoughts and insights emerged one after another, shaking people's basic social and religious beliefs. People witnessed the suffering and hardship of countless beings in the world, while God remained indifferent. This contradiction gradually led to resentment towards religion and even the abandonment and criticism of religious doctrines.

At the same time, in the early 19th century, many new Protestant denominations sprang up like mushrooms after the rain, such as Methodism, Baptism, and Quakerism. New Protestants were mostly from the working class, opposing the privileges and monopolistic status of the established church, and striving for religious equality and more social rights. This conflict intensified the contradictions between different social

strata, causing traditional religious concepts to be challenged like never before, further deepening social division and turmoil.

4. Impacts of Class Conflict

After studying the development process and causes of class conflict during the Industrial Revolution, it is essential to understand its impact on subsequent social development. This section will discuss the outcomes and effects of these conflicts.

4.1 The Establishment of the British Welfare System

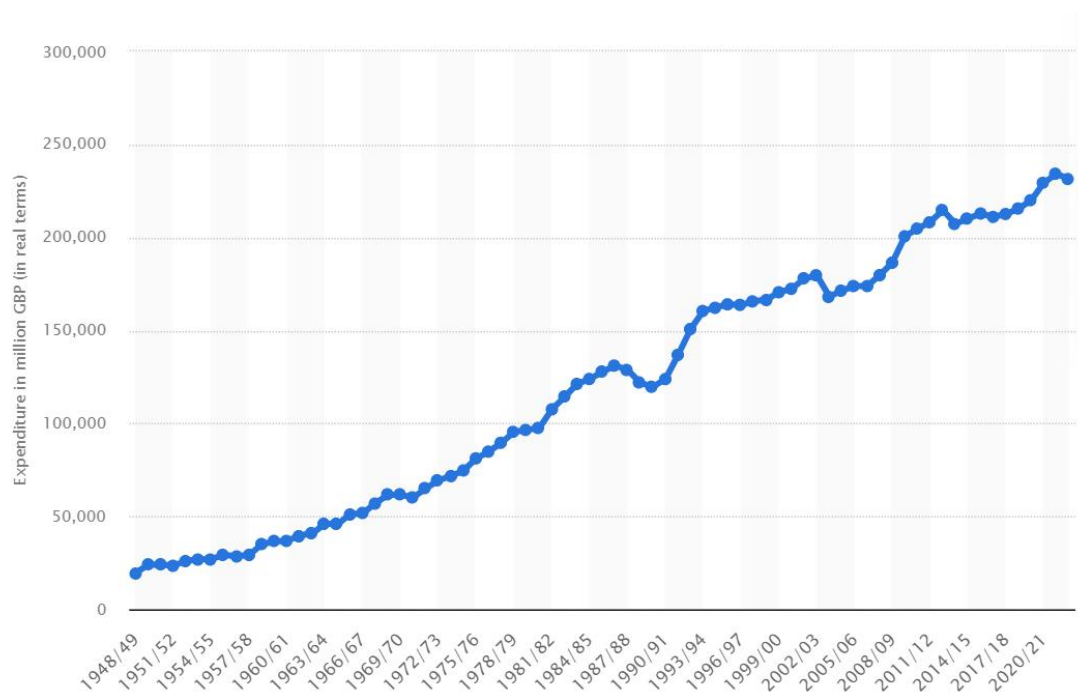
In the late 19th century, as the Industrial Revolution deepened, social inequality intensified, and the living conditions of the working class were extremely poor. The resurgence of the Chartist Movement in 1848 and the rise of the Labour Party to the political stage indicated that the political and economic struggles of the working class forced the ruling authorities to implement social reforms to prevent social unrest. In response to the strong demands of the working class, the government began to implement a series of social welfare policies and laws. For example, *the Factory Acts* were introduced to limit working hours and improve working conditions, especially for children and women workers. Additionally, *the Public Health Act* was enacted to improve urban sanitary conditions, reduce the spread of diseases, and enhance the quality of life for the working class.

Between the two world wars, Britain experienced severe economic crises, exacerbating social conflicts. Meanwhile, the success of the Russian October Revolution greatly inspired the working class worldwide, forcing capitalist countries to make theoretical and policy adjustments to counter the influence of socialism and address domestic pressures from the working class. To this end, the British government introduced a series of social welfare policies to alleviate social tensions and improve the living conditions of the working class. These included *the Old Age Pensions Act* of 1908, which provided pensions for the elderly, marking the beginning of a state-managed welfare system in Britain; *the National Insurance Act* of 1911, which provided unemployment and health insurance for workers; *the Unemployment Insurance Act* of 1920, which expanded unemployment insurance coverage; and *the Housing Act* of 1930, which addressed housing shortages and improved the living

conditions of the working class. Through these measures, the British government aimed to stabilize society, resist the influence of socialism, and demonstrate that capitalism could adapt and provide for its citizens.

During the post-World War II development period, the UK continued to increase its investment in social welfare. By implementing a series of new welfare policies and expanding the existing social security system, the UK made significant progress in ensuring the basic living needs of its residents and promoting social equity and stability. The growth in social welfare expenditure can be clearly seen in the chart below.

Government expenditure on benefits in the UK from 1948 to 2023



Notes:

source:UK benefits expenditure 2023 | Statista (reference 3)

4.2 The Rise in Political Status of the Working Class

In the late Industrial Revolution, the working class gradually formed an independent political force through the Chartist Movement and the establishment of trade unions. Although the Chartist Movement did not achieve immediate success, it laid the foundation for the political awakening and actions of the working class.

During this period, workers used various means to fight for better rights, especially promoting the passage of the Trade Union Act, which legalized trade unions and provided a platform for workers to collectively bargain. Additionally, the establishment of the Labour Party in 1900 marked the emergence of the working class on the British political stage. By participating in elections and legislation, the Labour Party gradually secured better working conditions and living standards for workers, significantly enhancing the political power of the working class and effectively safeguarding their interests.

Entering the 20th century, the political status of the working class further improved. Particularly during and after the two World Wars, the Labour Party formed governments multiple times, driving a series of significant social reforms, including the establishment of the National Health Service (NHS) by Clement Attlee's government in 1945 and the expansion of the welfare state. These reforms significantly improved the living conditions of the working class, such as free medical services, unemployment insurance, and housing guarantees. These measures not only raised the living standards of the working class but also solidified their position in British politics. Additionally, the Labour Party enacted legislation to protect workers' rights, such as *the National Insurance Act* and *the Education Act*. These measures safeguarded the economic interests of the working class, improved their quality of life, and strengthened their social security, highlighting the crucial role of the working class in promoting social equity and stability. Through these efforts, the working class not only gained economic security but also obtained greater political voice, thereby more effectively protecting their own interests.

The rise in political status of the working class is also reflected in the changing composition of the UK Parliament. From 1979 to 2015, the percentage of MPs from working-class backgrounds, including those in miscellaneous and manual worker categories, showed a marked increase. For instance, in 1979, working-class MPs constituted around 33% of the total, and this proportion rose to over 40% by 2005. This increase underscores the growing influence of the working class in British politics, allowing them to more effectively advocate for their interests and shape

policies that directly impact their lives.

4.3 The Rise of the Labor Movement and Trade Unions

The rise of the labor movement and trade unions provided a legitimate avenue for the working class to express their demands and raise their awareness. This development was a direct result of the class conflicts that arose during the Industrial Revolution, which highlighted the need for workers to have organized representation and a structured means to advocate for their rights. Since the passage of *the Trade Union Act* in 1871, which recognized unions as the legal representatives of the working class, trade unions have continuously strived to secure benefits for workers.

In contemporary times, trade unions continue to play a vital role in advocating for workers' rights and interests. They remain a powerful force in collective bargaining, negotiating better wages, benefits, and working conditions for their members. One notable example of their influence is the 2017 campaign by the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) for a higher minimum wage. The TUC successfully lobbied the government to increase the National Living Wage, benefiting millions of low-paid workers across the country. Unions also provide legal support and representation for workers in disputes with employers, ensuring that labor laws are upheld. Beyond workplace issues, trade unions engage in broader social and political activism, influencing policies on social justice, economic inequality, and labor rights. Modern British trade unions have a large membership and significant organizational strength, with the TUC boasting 6.2 million members, making it a considerable force. In the foreseeable future, trade unions will continue to play a crucial role in promoting fair labor practices and enhancing the overall welfare of workers.

5. Conclusion

This paper reviews the historical progression of class conflict during the Industrial Revolution and analyzes the causes of class conflict from three perspectives: new class relations, unequal distribution of political power, and cultural and religious changes. As an almost inevitable issue in capitalist society, class conflict not only promoted the establishment of the modern social welfare system in Britain but also facilitated changes in the British political landscape and led to the creation of trade

unions as a platform for united struggle. From these significant impacts, it is evident that class conflict holds immense power in driving social development and progress. This aligns with Marx's statement: "The conflicts arising from the conditions of bourgeois society must be resolved through struggle; they cannot be eliminated by utopian means."

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