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978-0-521-12515-4 - The Dynamics of Working-class Politics: The Labour Movement in
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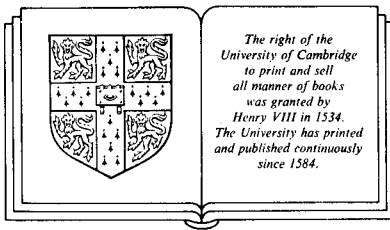
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THE DYNAMICS OF WORKING-CLASS POLITICS

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN
PRESTON, 1880-1940

MICHAEL SAVAGE

University of Sussex



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Preface

The decline in Labour's share of the vote in Britain over the past twenty years has made any simple association between social class and political party look increasingly problematic. Indeed, a number of writers have argued that in contemporary society class is giving way to other political cleavages: new social movements, local social movements, consumption-based cleavages and the like.¹ Arguments such as these, however, often rely on a stereotypical view of what working-class politics have been in the past. Compared with modern complexities, politics in the past seem to have revolved around class identities in a straightforward way: most working-class people voted Labour (regardless of their occupation, gender, ethnic background or location), and voting Labour was primarily a means of defending the working class's economic interests within the overall framework of a capitalist society. Yet there are remarkably few studies actually analysing in detail the dynamics of the Labour movement in this century which show that this is an accurate picture.

This paucity in part reflects the interests of historians in socialist and left-wing movements, rather than in the Labour party itself. There are studies of areas where the Communists were strong, and of industries and occupations known for their radicalism.² Yet the vast majority of members of the working class, who did not support organisations to the left of the Labour party, tend to be overlooked in such accounts. Some useful general accounts have appeared which are beginning to rectify this,³ but these pay inadequate attention to the precise nature of the extent of popular participation in the Labour party, and to the extent to which local Labour politics differed from the well-known concerns of the national parliamentary leaders.

This book aims primarily to present a detailed account of the nature of the Labour movement in the North Lancashire town of Preston between 1880 and 1940. Preston was chosen for solidly pragmatic reasons: it is

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accessible, and there are some good source materials to draw on. The main concern is to interrogate the relationship between the changing social structure of the town and its political alignments, through detailed accounts of both. In the early stages of my research I was interested in examining relations between the Labour party and other left-wing organisations: in the course of my research this came to be less important (given the weakness of left-wing organisations in Preston) and the pivotal question became the need to explain the local party's political strategies, and the way in which these were related to the type of people active in Labour politics.

It is this issue which is developed at length in the book. In any detailed case study it is easy to stress complexities and ambiguities not captured by generalisations, and inevitably the last chapters 4–7 of the book which present the research on Preston do just that. My aim however is not merely to do justice to the complexities, but to present an analytical framework with which to conceptualise working-class politics more generally. Of prime importance here is the need to conceptualise the political strategies of local political parties, and the way these relate to working-class interests and capacities, based primarily at the local level. This is the subject of the first three chapters, and while it is in the main derived from studies of the British working class between 1850 and 1950, it is hoped that the ideas presented have a more widespread applicability.

Although the chapters 1–3 may attract sociologists and chapters 4–7 historians, it is worth emphasising that they should be read together. The arguments advanced in the first part of the book serve to pinpoint the features to be examined in the material on Preston, but they are only fully demonstrated, I think, by reference to it. Similarly the chapters on Preston do not contain a general social and political history of the town, but concentrate only on those issues which have been developed in the first three chapters.

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Acknowledgements

This book has drawn on a great variety of intellectual disciplines, from labour history to political sociology and historical geography. I believe this has been a fertile encounter and reflects the fact that I have studied in a variety of academic environments: departments of history, social history, sociology and urban studies. My fascination with the minutiae of Labour politics on the one hand, and Marxist theory on the other, owes much to my old friends at the University of York: in particular Daniel Benjamin, John Moorhouse, Jon Smith and Paul Wild. A year studying social history at the University of Lancaster also provided a focus for these concerns in the study of Lancashire and the cotton industry: Mike Winstanley and John Walton were helpful here. It was the years spent at the sociology department of the University of Lancaster which gave me the opportunity to consider in greater depth the theoretical issues raised. Alan Warde must get the most thanks here: he managed to find the ideal blend of encouragement (when my confidence was low) and constructive criticism (when my confidence was too high). The other members of the Lancaster Regionalism Group (Dan Shapiro, John Urry, Sylvia Walby and Annie Witz) helped provide the ideal environment for discussing many of the issues which interested me. In particular Jane Mark-Lawson's work has influenced me more than she probably thinks. Numerous conversations with Brian Longhurst as well as with other colleagues mentioned above have advanced my understanding of general sociological concerns. Finally, since moving to Sussex I have benefited from discussions with members of the staff of the urban studies department, particularly Simon Duncan and Pete Saunders.

A large number of institutions have helped me in my detailed research. In particular, the Harris Library in Preston (always an interesting place to work), the Lancashire County Record Office, Preston, the Labour Party Archive in London, the Public Record Office at Kew and the University Libraries at Lancaster and the London School of Economics should be singled out.

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