

Preprint

Gender and Uneven Working Class Formation in the Irish Linen
Industry

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Introduction

In a poem first published in 1804, the Irish weaver-poet James Orr (1935) nostalgically portrayed life in a linen manufacturing household "in years of yore."

He weav'd himsel', an' keepet twathree gaun,
 Wha prais'd him ay for hale weel-handled yarn;
His thrifty wife an' wise wee lasses span,
 While warps and queels employ'd anither bairn;
Some stript ilk morn an' thresh'd, the time to earn
 To scamper wi' the houn's frae hill to hill;
Some learn'd the question-beuk in nybr'ing barn -
 Christy wrought unco close, whyles took a gill,
But when his wab was out had ay a hearty fill.ⁱ

This rich stanza depicts a prosperous farmer-weaver household in which relations between man and wife, father and children, farmer and cottiers, are simultaneously complementary and hierarchical. Each member provides an essential input to the small enterprise in which the rhythm of production is task-oriented - the boys work especially hard in the mornings in order to "earn" time to go hunting, while Christy their father, a skilled weaver, finishes the piece before indulging his appetite for alcohol.

The account is both nostalgic and romanticized. Orr makes this explicit by setting his tale in a legendary time which only Brice, "the auld herd on the moor" can remember. Yet social scientists have often adopted a similar image of the pre-industrial household as a self-contained, harmoniously functioning unit. This "ideal type" has tended to obscure the inequalities which existed within and between households and,

in turn, the significance of gender in the process of working class formation. I argue in this paper that working class formation in the Irish linen industry can best be explained if gender is placed at the heart of the analysis. Nostalgic images of an ideal domestic sphere, like that found in Orr's poem, should be understood not as descriptions of household production in past time, but as interventions in gender and class politics at the time of writing.

The paper proceeds through a critique and re-evaluation of two influential perspectives on European working class formation as they apply to the Irish case. They are the theory of "proto-industrialization" as it has been developed by Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm (1981) and E.P. Thompson's (1966) "cultural" approach to the development of class consciousness. Gender must be made central to both perspectives, I argue, if they are to explain regional and social differentiation in industrialization and class formation. In the first part of the paper I show how the sexual division of labor between flax spinning and linen weaving led to the uneven emergence of a new class system in the northern half of Ireland. In the second part I argue that rural industrial producers experienced the transition to industrial capitalism as changes in the relations between women and men, and that in turn, gender meanings were central to the cultural construction of working-class identities.

My analysis of the cultural changes associated with class formation centres on the gendered meanings attached to the

consumption of beer and tea in the poems of "rhyming weavers" from the north-east of Ireland. These works, published by subscription during the first half of the nineteenth century, give unique clues to how ordinary people understood and represented the changes surrounding the transition to centralized production. They also impose a number of limitations on the analysis in the second part of this paper. First, discussion of the construction of gendered working-class identities is confined to that part of rural industrial Ireland which made the transition to factory industry, and further to the descendents of Scots and English settlers who were relatively privileged in comparison to native Irish inhabitants, and who had higher levels of literacy. Secondly, while a strong case can be made that individual weaver-poets were representative of their communities (Akenson and Crawford 1977), both weavers and poets were male. Sarah Leech appears to have been the only spinner who published poems in the tradition of the rhyming weavers (Hewitt 1974: 40-41). The value of folk poetry, however, lies less in its articulation of individual attitudes, than in its expression of the cultural values and ideals of ordinary people. The poems should be read as texts embedded in a broader popular discourse. By obliging us to think about class-formation in the language of everyday life, they help ensure that our analyses are "held tightly in check by the voices of the past" (Davis 1983:5).ⁱⁱ

Part 1

Gender in the Development of the Irish Linen Industry

By 1800, the Irish linen industry might be said to have reached both its zenith and a turning point. Originating in the Scots and English settler communities of the north-east and nurtured by favorable British trade regulations, commercial flax spinning and linen weaving provided two of Ireland's most important export commodities throughout the eighteenth century. Generally furnishing their own raw materials, Irish rural households sold the woven cloth to drapers who had it finished before reselling it to merchants in Belfast and London. Yarn not consumed within the household was bought up by jobbers who transported it for resale to weavers or to merchants for direct export. Linen yarn from Ireland was used as warp in British cotton manufacturing, while Irish linen cloth provided, among other things, shirts for the growing British working class. At the turn of the nineteenth century cloth exports continued to rise but yarn exports had declined significantly as a result of competition from British machine-spun yarn. The industry was regulated by the trustees of the "Linen Board," a body established by the Irish parliament in 1711.

Almost all households in the northern half of Ireland had some connection with the linen industry by this time, and the social organization of its production took the form of a series of uneven relationships across space and between social groups. First, the sexual division of labor between spinning

- women's work - and weaving - men's work - confined women to the most labor-intensive and poorly remunerated end of the production process. Second, this sexual division of labor coincided with a regional division of labor between the north-east, where most of the cloth was produced, and the north-west which depended largely on supplying yarn to the weaving districts (despite a dramatic increase in weaving in County Mayo at the end of the eighteenth century). Within the weaving districts some households were dependent on entrepreneurial farmers and drapers who put out bought yarn to be woven by the piece. In the vicinity of Belfast, moreover, a fledgling cotton industry was thriving, and many weavers had been induced by high wages to weave cotton put out by mill spinners. Religious difference cross-cut these relationships, with Catholics likely to be overrepresented at the lowest ends of the production line, namely, amongst cottier-weavers and spinners.ⁱⁱⁱ

What were the social processes through which this complex division of labor had emerged? The most powerful theoretical account of rural industrialization to date, is that of "proto-industrialization." Hans Medick and his colleagues (Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm 1981) expanded the idea, first put forward by Franklin Mendels (1972), into a comprehensive theory of rural industry as a mode of production in its own right.^{iv} They argued that rural industry developed on the basis of a contradiction between the subsistence-oriented strategies of rural households and the profit motive of merchant

capitalists. The availability of income from commodity production encouraged earlier marriage and land subdivision, leading to population growth and increasing dependence on industrial earnings, thus ensuring a permanent oversupply of labor. Merchants extracted surplus profits from cottage producers according to the theory, because the latter's small farms and gardens enabled them to sell their products at less than the cost of household reproduction. Under these circumstances there was little incentive to raise productivity through capital investment, and producers often found themselves in a downward spiral of impoverishment, indebtedness and self-exploitation - a process described by David Levine (1983) as "industrial involution." The limitations, as well as the advantages of rural industry lay in the subsistence-orientation of household production units. Merchants could respond to increased demand only by expanding into new areas of the countryside. Proto-industrialization thus reached its limits when the costs of spatial expansion became too great and merchants turned increasingly towards direct control over the labor process in factory production.

Two major problems have since been identified with the proto-industrialization thesis, both of which are evident in the Irish case. First, the thesis does not account for regional differences and interdependencies in rural industrialization and deindustrialization. While the linen industry does seem to have been associated with the "classic" proto-industrial trends of population growth and land

subdivision, there was considerable local variation. Moreover, the thesis cannot by itself explain why some regions made the transition to centralized, factory production while others experienced deindustrialization and decline. Second, the proto-industrialization thesis excludes almost by definition the possibility of capital accumulation and class differentiation amongst household producers themselves - both processes which occurred to some extent in the Irish northeastern weaving districts.^v

These shortcomings originate in two flawed assumptions in the model of household production at the core of the theory (Harris 1981). First, households are assumed to be characterized by functional interdependence between their members. By stressing family co-operation, Medick and his colleagues did not fully recognize the significance of unequal relations of production within households. The second problematic assumption is that households are bounded entities. By developing their analysis on the basis of an abstract "normal" type, the theorists of proto-industrialization failed to take into account relations between household production units, both locally and regionally.^{vi}

In the Irish case, relations within and between households were structured by gender. Brenda Collins (1982) has shown that the regional division of labor between spinning and weaving districts emerged as a consequence of the sexual division of labor which confined women to spinning and men to

weaving. Because spinning was a more labor-intensive task than weaving, the demand for women's labor exceeded that for men's. At least four spinners were required to supply a full-time weaver with yarn. Weaving households faced with a shortage of women's labor might add female relatives or servants to the core nuclear family, or even hire itinerant spinners on a temporary basis. As the weaving industry intensified in the north-east, however, the demand for yarn could not be met by local women. Population growth and land subdivision made weaving households increasingly dependent on the produce of their looms, and correspondingly greater quantities of yarn were imported from outlying districts. Thus even remote, mountainous places, where subsistence agriculture prevailed, were incorporated in the commercial linen industry by the sale of a few hanks of yarn to jobbers who supplied the weaving districts. Spinning was actively promoted by landlords who sought to increase both the amount of rent paid in money and quantity of rent overall.^{vii}

The eighteenth century growth of the Irish linen industry thus depended on a much greater spatial expansion of spinning than of weaving precisely because of the division of tasks by sex within rural industrial households. Furthermore, the relationship between women and men, and therefore between spinning and weaving districts, was an exploitative one. The sexual division of labor not only led to imbalances in weaving households, it also ensured that while women did much of the work of cultivating flax and preparing it for the loom, the

most capital-intensive and highly remunerated stage of the household production process was monopolized by men. A loom, which cost at least five times as much as a spinning wheel, represented a much greater investment. Spinning was more labor-intensive: it took up to six days worth of spinning to produce yarn for a day's worth of weaving. Finally, spinning was poorly remunerated in comparison with weaving. According to Young's (1892) estimates, a weaver could earn from ten pence a day to a shilling and four pence for fine work in the late eighteenth century, whereas a spinner could earn just three or four pence a day. Nevertheless, witnesses to the 1825 British Parliamentary "Select Committee on the Linen Trade of Ireland" calculated that spinning contributed at least half the value of linen. When it is considered that women were also responsible for many of the tasks involved in cultivating and preparing the flax for spinning (Crawford 1991), it is clear that the Irish linen industry was built on the under- and often unremunerated labor of women.

This exploitation of women transcended individual households to drive the uneven regional development of the industry as a whole. The supply of underpriced yarn from the north-west fostered the growth of linen weaving and facilitated class differentiation in the north-east. Population growth and land subdivision made weaving households increasingly reliant on yarn imported from outlying districts, which in turn created an opening for entrepreneurial farmers and drapers who put out yarn to be woven by the piece. Most

of these "manufacturers" operated on a very small scale, employing from five to twenty weavers on average (Crawford 1988: 45). These processes were escalated by changes in the technology of bleaching which allowed for weaving to be a year-round, rather than a seasonal activity.

Petty accumulation in the weaving districts was built on industrial involution in the yarn districts. Irish witnesses to the 1826 Select Committee insisted, in the face of incredulity on the part of the commissioners, that "independent" spinners produced yarn more cheaply than outputters could. "They set little value on their own labor," said Peter Besnard. In fact, women's labor input responded to household requirements rather than to market value. Observers noted that a temporary need for cash often led women to sell their yarn for little more than the price of raw flax (Wakefield 1812: 684). Households integrated to the market through women's work thus remained subsistence-oriented while, at the same time, the availability of income from spinning fostered population growth, land subdivision and ultimately, immiseration.

The low cost of women's labor also provided the Irish linen industry with its competitive edge, discouraging investment in technology comparable to that already occurring in Britain. One of Ireland's earliest mill-spinners told Edward Wakefield (1812: 684) that "The leading cause against the extension of machinery, is the low price of labor. Yarn spun by women is sold here much cheaper than the same article

manufactured by machinery in England." Therefore, while finishing the cloth had been partially mechanized in Ireland from the middle of the eighteenth century, spinning mills did not appear in any number in the north-east until the 1820's. These early, water-driven mills were limited in scope and did not immediately threaten domestic production. By contrast, when steam-driven mills were established around Belfast in the 1830's, the hand-spinning of yarn rapidly became obsolete, depriving many outlying households of their sole source of income. Their distance from the mills meant that weavers outside the north-east could not compete with the households of the "core" weaving district who survived by weaving mill-spun yarn under increasingly impoverished conditions, until the introduction of power-looms in the 1860's. In the yarn districts, the loss of income from spinning left many households particularly vulnerable to the failure of the potato crop in the mid 1840's. In testimonies to the Poor Inquiry of 1836, spinners reported that they could no longer earn a living "on account of the mills around Belfast" (B.P.P 1836).

Just as gender relations were at the heart of uneven rural industrial growth, and eventually of deindustrialization in the yarn districts, so the transition to factory production and working-class formation in the weaving districts were fundamentally gendered processes. As weavers and manufacturers relied increasingly on imported yarn, the significance of women's labor within weaving households

declined. Women no longer provided the decisive labor input, so that their income had acquired the status of "pin money." In County Armagh Charles Coote (1804: 253) found that women's earnings were spent on "finery" because "the men's labor procures them provisions." Women were thus in a sense "freed" from the demands of the household economy to become mill workers. In 1838 almost 70% of all employees in Irish spinning mills were female (B.P.P. 1839). Mechanization ultimately altered the division of labor within weaving households, as women began working at the loom in significant numbers. The sexual division of labor which had served to maintain exploitative relations between women and men, and between spinning and weaving households, had become irrelevant once the production process was controlled by mill owners.

Both Medick (1976) and Levine (1977) recognized that women and children provided the crucial marginal work effort which made possible the "super-exploitation" of proto-industrial households - that is, the purchase of commodities produced in such households at less than the cost of household reproduction. Because they continued to see the household in functionalist terms, however, the theorists of proto-industrialization failed to recognize the full significance of gender relations for the overall growth and transformation of rural industrial production. In Ireland, exploitation on the basis of gender crossed the boundaries of individual households, as manufacturers and weavers benefitted from the work of spinners in the yarn districts, as well as the work of

women and children in their own households. Medick and his colleagues focussed on the contradictions between merchant capitalism and the family economy of rural households to explain the dynamic of rural industrial growth and decline. My analysis shows that, at least in the Irish case, unequal gender relations within and between households must be placed at the heart of the thesis if it is also to account for differentiation in both rural industrial development and the transition to capitalist industry.

The second part of this paper explores the cultural strategies adopted by household producers in the north-east of Ireland as they both resisted and adapted to these changes. In creating new working class identities they were responding to and constructing changing gender relations. Nostalgic images of an ideal domestic sphere (and of ideal relations between women and men) played an important part in this process.

Part 2

Gender in the Transformation of Everyday Life

Early in the nineteenth century, upper-class observers of the weaving community in north-east Ireland noted a cultural transition from disorderly, task-oriented patterns of work and leisure to a new regularity and sobriety in everyday life. When Arthur Young toured the weaving districts in the late 1770's, he found precisely the contradiction, emphasized by

Medick, between producers' preference for leisure and the profit-motive of traders. "When provisions are very cheap the poor spend much of their time in whiskey houses," he reported from Lurgan, County Armagh, "All the drapers wish that oatmeal was never under 1d. a pound." From Warrenstown, County Down, he reported that weavers were "licentious and disorderly." Their public and crowded leisure activities included such amusements as cock-fighting and bull-baiting. Fairs and markets were occasions for courtship, drinking and brawling. Hunting hares on foot was the favorite pursuit of young men. Young was the astonished witness of such a hunt in Maghan, County Armagh, where he learned to his disapproval that "a pack of hounds is never heard, but all the weavers leave their looms and away they go after them by hundreds."

Observers in the early 1800's, by contrast, emphasized that weaving households had abandoned such work and leisure habits in favour of time-disciplined labor and "respectability." Sir Charles Coote (1804: 264) compared the inhabitants of County Armagh with those of "the poorer counties" in terms of their greater time discipline: "In this county, a steady industry affords a sufficiency for the moderate comforts of life, and will admit of a redundancy for other purposes, without exhausting nature at such a sedentary business as the loom." Ferguson (1816: 81) similarly applauded the industriousness of the weaving population in Ballymoyer, attributing their well being to their own sober lifestyles: "Those little luxuries may be justly considered as

the rewards of industry and sobriety, as there is not a single public house in the parish, where spirits are sold." By the 1830's, the Ordnance Survey memorialists were usually able to report that pastimes like cock-fighting, bull-baiting and card-playing were no longer popular (Connolly 1983).

What can account for this remarkable transformation in the everyday life patterns of industrial producers in the north-east? In his account of the lifestyles and political behaviour of proto-industrial producers, Medick relied heavily on E.P. Thompson's notion of "plebian culture." Thompson (1974) applied the term to the social layer of workers and small employers in eighteenth century England. He argued that rural artisans and early manufacturing workers were less in a position of dependence, more free from discipline at work, and more free to choose between work and leisure, than they had been before, or were to be in the early decades of factory production. They established their own relatively autonomous way of life in which "...physical and emotional needs, work and pleasure were not yet separated from each other" (Medick 1981: 66).

The transition to factory production involved a struggle on the part of employers to impose "discipline" - and particularly regularity of time-keeping - on this refractory working population. The task-oriented work rhythms of cottage producers waited on the necessities of family life, on seasonal change, and on the specific task to be completed. By contrast, machine industry introduced a quantifiable notion of

time and led to a conceptual distinction between "work" and "life" which would have been meaningless under the proto-industrial system (Thompson 1967). The advent of the factory was therefore accompanied by the suppression of plebian culture. It meant the adoption of more methodical habits in everyday life, a decline in the significance of festivals and holidays, and a movement towards a sobriety and respectability which was to lay the foundation for more organized class resistance. According to Thompson, Methodist evangelism played a crucial role in this process through its celebration of a "methodical discipline in every aspect of life," and of labor as a "pure act of virtue." He argued that working people turned to Methodism in response to the political disillusionment surrounding the failure of the French revolution (Thompson 1966: 366).

For Thompson and Medick, then, the cultural transformation which occurred in north-east Ireland should be understood as a fundamental component of the process of working-class formation. Connolly (1983: 243-244) has argued along these lines that Protestant evangelical clergy in Ulster succeeded in reforming the habits of their parishioners only because successful industrialization had already begun, in contrast to their Catholic counterparts throughout Ireland whose parishioners were, economically speaking "not so ready to play their parts."

I would suggest, however, that this argument, as it stands, is overly linear and deterministic. The adoption of

"respectable" habits of work and leisure by a segment of the Irish rural industrial population cannot be understood as a response to the imposition of a capitalist labor process, since that was not in place for most workers until much later in the nineteenth century. Moreover, while religious evangelicalism clearly did play an important role in introducing new everyday life patterns in Ulster, it also had a part in the revolutionary ideas abroad in the rebellion year of 1798 (Hempton and Hill 1992). These cultural changes cannot, therefore, be seen simply as the "chiliasm of despair." Instead, they represented a strategic effort by segments of the rural industrial community to carve out a separate cultural space in the face of threatening political, social and economic changes. I will argue, through an analysis of folk poems in the following paragraphs, that gender constituted one important dimension of these changes.^{viii}

Medick (1981) observed that the conspicuous consumption of urban luxuries was one way in which rural industrial producers set about establishing their own way of life. Indeed consumption items, from the mundane (potatoes and whiskey) to the luxurious and exotic (fine clothing and tea), were a common theme in the poetry of Ulster's rhyming weavers. The poets used consumption items as symbolic vehicles through which they represented and organized their perceptions of the social environment and their sense of identity. This is most obvious in some of James Herbison's poems, where he uses the device of lamenting a worn-out object to conjure up the sense

of loss generated by the machine's destruction of a way of life. Similarly, in some of James Orr's (1935) poems, tea, potatoes and beer provide the foci for humorous and extraordinarily detailed accounts of everyday life. In many of the poems, attention to the meanings surrounding valued objects provides insights to the social meanings by which the poet's community constructed its sense of identity. Here, I am particularly interested in how those meanings were organized by gender, and in turn, organized gender relations. I will explore these processes through an analysis of the meanings surrounding alcohol (largely associated with men) and tea (largely associated with women).

Alcohol consumption was pivotal in Ireland to the public amusements where, as Medick (1981) has written, the rural industrial community culturally reproduced itself. Gullickson (1986) found that in the Caux region of northern France, women were generally excluded from public leisure activities, but descriptions of Irish fairs, markets and other gatherings in the early nineteenth century indicate that women were active participants and, indeed, were active drinkers. This is reflected in James Orr's celebration of plebian culture, "Ballycarry Fair," where "bargains, courtships, toasts, huzzas, Combine in blythe disorder, O!" (1935: 155-157. First published in 1804).

Like his father, Orr (1770-1816) was a weaver and small farmer who lived near Ballycarry in the Presbyterian parish of Templecorran, on the east coast of County Antrim. Known to

local people as the "Bard of Ballycarry," Orr supported the uprising of "United Irishmen" in 1798, and spent a few months in exile in America under pain of being arrested for treason. Disillusioned by his experience with rebellion, Orr increasingly emphasized the importance of moral reform for curing his countrymen's ills. Interestingly, he wrote in a letter to a friend that "I wish B'carry Fair in particular never had been written." (Akenson and Crawford 1977: 70). Orr's revised attitude towards alcohol is found in *The Foundered Farmer* (first published posthumously in 1817), where he describes how, as a result of the drunkard's death, his mother sickens and dies, and the girl he planned to marry loses her mind. The poet did not follow his own moral strictures: he died a bachelor and "well-beloved drunk." (Akenson and Crawford 1977: 10)

Orr was not unique amongst the rhyming weavers in condemning drunkenness in his poetry. Hugh Porter (1813) grimly describes The Drunkard's Fate - death in a "dirty, roofless byre":

The value o' a virtuous life
Owre late he learns,
So, leaves a broken-hearted wife
An' beggar'd bairns.

Porter's poem was inscribed to his patron, which raises the question of whether negative accounts of drinking in the folk poems were designed to please upper-class readers. Whiskey-consumption does not seem to have declined in north-east

Ireland; rather it continued to increase overall through the 1820's (Malcolm 1986). On the other hand, the comments of upper-class observers suggest an increase in sobriety, at least among some segments of the rural industrial community. In addition to the observation from Ballymoyer, County Armagh, quoted above, Dubourdieu insisted that drunkenness was a vice "daily losing ground" in County Antrim (1812: 499) and that in County Down, "the inhabitants are growing daily more sober." (1802: 260)

It seems reasonable to infer that there was at least a growing lip-service on the part of some segments of the rural industrial population to the idea of temperance. Moreover, the poetry of the rhyming weavers does not suggest a shift towards the celebration of abstinence, but rather a change in the social meaning of drinking. There is an interesting contrast between the excoriation of the public house in Thomas Beggs' (1836) The Village Ale-House and its celebration in his On Saturday Night. Beggs (1789-1847) was born the son of a farm laborer (and second cousin of James Orr) in Glenwhirry, County Antrim. He lived a colorful life, spending some time at sea, but later finding employment at a number of bleachworks near Belfast (Hewitt 1974: 69-74). The Village Ale-House is Beggs' rewrite of part of Oliver Goldsmith's (1966) poem, The Deserted Village, a critique of rural social change in England. Goldsmith laments the current state of affairs by contrasting it to an idealized village of the past (thought to have been modeled on his birth place in Ireland).

Of the ale-house, he writes "Thither no more the peasant shall repair, / To sweet oblivion of his daily care." Beggs, however, subtitles his version "Goldsmith's 'Country Ale-House' contrasted" and describes the pub as a place where "starvling weavers oft in groups repair / to banish reason and to bring despair."

In contrast to this image of a place where "village wretches pass away the night, / In vile obscenity and brawling fight," in Beggs' On Saturday Night the ale-house provides the company of true friends which is "a gem on life's fast-ebbing tide, / And the best in the casquet of Time." The differences between the kinds of sociability described in the two poems centre on the twin themes of time and reason. The very title of On Saturday Night suggests that its pleasures take place only within the context of time-disciplined labor "when the week is away, / And its trouble and toils are gone by." Whereas in The Village Ale-House sense "expires," reason is "banished" and madness "raves," in On Saturday Night "he who has sorrow and care to allay, / He may taste the wine-cup and be sage." Goldsmith wrote in The Deserted Village, "Yes! let the rich deride, the proud disdain, / These Simple blessings of the lowly train." Beggs echoes this sentiment in On Saturday Night when he celebrates the value of true friendship in the ale-house: "Though the dull ones may blame, and the proud ones despise."

James Orr's poem Address to Beer, where he contrasts the virtues of that beverage to the evils of whiskey, is another

example of an effort to change the social meaning of drinking towards moderation and decency. While beer consumption was never widespread in Ireland, especially not in the northern counties (Malcolm 1987: 22), it was considered to be a healthy drink, and it is in this context that we must read Orr's assertion that "Renown'd Reformer! thou has freed / Frae sufferin's tragic, / Unnumber'd fools, wha turn'd their head / Wi' Whiskey's magic." The virtues of beer which he extolls are its lack of potency and cheapness. There is a sense in which beer is the honest working-man's drink, in contrast to whiskey which impoverishes its crazed victims, and punch which is favoured "mang nice tea-parties." Thus Orr's beer, like Beggs' ale-house, posits a social place and identity which is below polite society but above those who desperately seek to forget their poverty and misery in drink. Alcohol consumption remains an important component of cultural reproduction, but that culture has shifted from one characterized by spasmodic indulgence to one (ideally) characterized by regulated moderation.

Central to the critique of intemperance in the poems above is alcohol's impact on the domestic scene. Whereas Goldsmith had presented the ale-house as a place where coy maidens flirt with their beaux, in Beggs' version it becomes the site of marital infidelity and only "pert haridans" seek to be "pressed." Orr celebrates beer because its adherents do not linger in the ale-house: "An' spen'thrifts wont to stay a week in / The house of pleasure, / On tenpence worth set

hameward streekin,' / An' hain their treasure." The respectable beverage is thus associated with private virtue and the restriction of women to the domestic sphere, in contrast to that unrespectable drink, whiskey, which is associated with plebian disorder in the public sphere.

In The Penitent, Orr's great poem on the theme of moral improvement, the central character's wife is described as a helpless victim of his addiction to "plebian" amusements, including drunkenness. Worst of all, perhaps, he drives her to indulge in vices of her own:

Mary ne'er min't the house - mair like a byre,
But clash'd wi' nyber wives. Unkent to him
For tea, an' snuff, the troubled dames desire,
She'd smuggled meal an' seeds; tho' hunger grim
Devour'd the duddy weans, now in a wretched trim.^{ix}

Just as the meaning of alcohol changed in the cultural transformation associated with class formation, so the poems suggest a shift in the meanings surrounding tea, which was culturally associated with women. Specifically, tea-drinking became identified with women's addiction to luxuries and consequent abdication of their domestic responsibilities.^x

Once again, James Orr's work exemplifies this transition. In his poem simply entitled Tea, he emphasizes its role in the cultural reproduction of the community and the household. Tea eases the tensions between women and men, deflecting the malignancy of older women's gossip, making wives tolerant of their husbands' drinking and curing men of hangovers, enabling them to work. While Orr makes it clear that men also drank

tea, it is most strongly associated with women and with the successful functioning of the domestic sphere. Tea even features in courtship, as young women seek the identity of their "future match" from the spae-wife, who reads their fortunes in the tea-leaves. In this poem (in contrast to The Penitent) Orr specifically rejects the addictive qualities of tea: "Tea mak's man a nerveles wrig, / The doctor says - p-x on the prig!"

Sarah Leech in her Address to Bachelors, on the other hand, warns young men against the "dames of fashion" who fool those who "gape for riches" by their finery.

Too late you may have cause to wail,
For should the tea or whiskey fail,
She, vixen-like, will you assail,
Or chide and snap,
And swear, should you be dragged to jail,
She'll have her drap.

For Leech, women's consumption of luxuries runs counter to their role in the household. She ends rather coyly with the announcement that she must get back to her spinning. Leech's poem has a certain poignance, since we are told in the introduction to her collection that having become lame, her spinning wheel was "the only means she now has to depend on for her subsistence." Born the daughter of an "industrious linen weaver" in 1804, she lived near Raphoe, County Donegal, on the outskirts of the linen-weaving district, and had formerly been a schoolteacher (1828: 10-16). When Address to Bachelors was published, the market for hand-spun yarn was

Frae ithers love.

This strategy worked, but at the expense of weakening the way of life represented by the teapot which was burnt thin, and which finally broke "the day the wheels began to fail." Now the old woman can no longer support herself by spinning and she contemplates the broken teapot alone.

My reading of the folk poems suggests that the gender-specific meanings surrounding the commodities of alcohol and tea - both once important aspects of the cultural reproduction of the rural industrial way of life in north-east Ireland - underwent a transformation in the first half of the nineteenth century. Both were increasingly perceived to have undermined the peace and stability of the household, and to have inhibited men and women from performing their appropriate roles. These shifting cultural meanings can be understood partly as a response to social changes over which the linen-weaving community had little or no control. As the analysis in the first half of this paper shows, changing gender relations were indeed at the heart of those processes which undermined the independence of linen weaving households and ultimately, household production itself. Thomas Beggs' The Auld Wife's Address to her Spinning Wheel makes it clear that rural industrial producers understood proletarianization and the transition to mechanized industry precisely in terms of changing gender relations. His poem expresses this so well that it is worth quoting at length.

The mountain lass, at her wee bit wheel,
 How blythe was her e'e, an' how rosy her cheek!
Her bosom was white, an' her heart it was leal, -
 Her mien it was modest, her manner was meek;
But now the pert maidens, wha ply in the mill,
 How wan is their visage, - how dim is their e'e
For the ban they maun bide is enough to chill
 The spring o' the heart an' to deaden their glee;
To toil for men that are hard to please,
In a hot-bed rank wi' vice an' disease.

An' when they speak, it maun be wi' a squeal;
 They maun rise an' rin at the toll o' a bell,
An' brook the insult o' a tyrant an' de'il,
 An' the jargon they hear is the language o' hell.
To breed a bit lassie in sic a vile place,
 Instead o' her ain father's cot on the green,
It puts the puir thing in a pitifu' case -
 Ah! black was the day that they made the machine.
It has added mair pelf to the hoards of the great
And left those that were low in a far lower state.^{xi}

Thus for Beggs the misery, impoverishment and moral decline associated with the mill is linked to the transfer of control over the labor of young women from fathers to capitalist employers.

The cultural changes which I have discussed must also be understood as a strategy, however. The lost domestic idyll which the rhyiming weavers nostalgically "remembered" was at least partly an ideal created to resist the processes threatening their way of life. The image of women as innocent, modest creatures under the protection of their fathers and husbands is belied by other images, such as that provided by Orr of the faction fight at Ballycarry Fair: "Ilk maid and matron hands her dear, / The baulder that he's hauden, O." The poems suggest that at least some segments of

the rural industrial community sought, by adopting a more sober, disciplined lifestyle, to establish a domestic and social space which would protect them from threatening changes. The cultural transformation which Thompson and Medick associated with working class formation, thus represented an effort on the part of the working population in the north of Ireland to resist and differentiate themselves from those changes which made women the vanguard of the industrial working class.

Conclusion

My thesis in this paper has been that in order to explain the transition to capitalist industry and working class formation as uneven and differentiated processes, gender must be placed at the heart of our analyses. I have argued that by representing the household as a bounded, harmoniously functioning unit, the proto-industrial thesis obfuscates the dynamic part played by unequal gender relations in the uneven growth and transformation of rural industrial production. Furthermore, I have suggested that unilinear models of working class formation have tended to ignore the centrality of gender in the experience of ordinary people, and in the cultural construction of working class identities.

The growth and uneven regional development of the Irish linen industry was rooted in an exploitative sexual division of labor which came to coincide with a regional division of labor between spinning and weaving districts. The former

experienced industrial involution and eventually deindustrialization, whereas the latter experienced some degree of class differentiation and ultimately became the site of mechanized, centralized production. Just as gender had structured the growth of rural industrial production, so the process of working-class formation in the north-east was a gendered process. Within weaving households, the significance of women's labor input declined as greater quantities of yarn were imported from outlying districts, so that women were in a sense "freed" to become workers in the first spinning mills. The introduction of mechanized spinning in turn resulted in women becoming weavers for the first time, as the sexual division of labor which had underwritten the regional configuration of rural industrial growth became obsolete.

My analysis of folk poems from that part of Ireland which experienced the transition to factory industry suggests that gendered meanings were in turn at the heart of the cultural changes associated with working-class formation. I have argued that some rural industrial producers represented these social changes in part as a disruption of appropriate gender roles, constructing a nostalgic image of the domestic sphere which was also an ideal. By means of changes in everyday life, they hoped to establish just such a safe space which would distance them from threatening, external forces which they were powerless to control.

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Endnotes

i. For an extended analysis of this poem, see Gray (1993b).

He weaved himself, and kept two or three going,
Who praised him for strong, well-handled yarn,
His thrifty wife and wise wee lasses span,
While warps and quills employed another child;
Some stripped each morn and threshed, the time to earn
To scamper with the hounds from hill to hill;
Some learned the question-book in neighboring barn -
Christy wrought very fine, at times drank a gill,
But when his web was out had a hearty fill.

ii. See Hewitt (1974) for the most comprehensive available account of the folk poets and their work. See Akenson and Crawford (1977) on the uses of folk poetry for social history, with special reference to Orr. Women were much less likely to be literate than men. Folklorists collected spinning songs in the west of Ireland late in the nineteenth century, which were sung when women gathered to work and were subject to continual improvisation. For an analysis of Irish spinning songs see Schneider (1989).

iii. General accounts of the Irish linen industry may be found in Gill (1925), Crawford (1972) and Cullen (1972). In an important

article Collins (1982) demonstrated the relationship between sexual and regional divisions of labor. The extent and form of class differentiation amongst weaving households is the subject of controversy. For the most authoritative discussion see Crawford (1988). For a more explicitly theoretical discussion see Cohen (1990).

iv. Schlumbohm disagreed with Medick and Kriedte on this point, preferring to think of proto-industrialization as a transitional mode. See "Introduction" in Industrialization before Industrialization (1981: 1-11).

v. For critical overviews of the proto-industrialization thesis see Gutmann and Laboutte (1984), Clarkson (1985), Berg (1989), and Engerman (1992). Kriedte et al (1993) have recently "revisited" proto-industrialization in a comprehensive survey of the literature. For critical applications of the thesis to the Irish linen industry see Almquist (1979), Collins (1982), Clarkson (1989) and Cohen (1990).

vi. See Gray (1993a) for an extended version of this argument. Kriedte et al (1993: 223-224) have recently observed that "the connection between the work-process and the family as the reproductive unit turns out to be more complex than was assumed by the original model." In particular they note that "the co-

operative division of labor did not invariably occur within the household, but could also occur between households; and households could adapt to the requirements of work and survival not only through the demographic acts of marrying and begetting children, but also through the social acts of single children leaving home or the admission of people who did not belong to the nuclear family."

vii. Land subdivision occurred in the weaving districts (especially in the proximity of major markets) because the availability of income from weaving encouraged farmers to divide their holdings amongst all their children, and to sublet greater portions of their land to cottiers. It also enabled these same cottiers to outbid the farmers for their plots when leases came up for renewal (Crawford 1976). In spinning districts the prevalence of the communal landholding system known as "rundale," together with the income from spinning, fostered subdivision (Almquist 1979).

viii. Hobsbawm (1984: 32) noted the "peculiar parallelism" between religious revivalism and the advance of political radicalism in England. See Thompson (1966: 389-391) for a response to this observation. Scott (1988: 72) has pointed out that Thompson's analogy between his work and a biography is revealing of the extent to which he saw working class formation

as a linear and teleological process.

ix. Mary never minded the house - more like a byre,

 But clashed with neighbor wives. Unknown to him
For tea, and snuff, the troubled dames desire,
 She'd smuggled meal and seeds; though hunger grim
Devoured the ragged children, now in a wretched trim.

x. This analysis of the meanings surrounding tea is elaborated more fully in Gray (1993c). For an account of the growth of tea-drinking in Ireland see Lysaght (1987).

xi. The mountain lass, at her wee small wheel,

 How blythe was her eye, and how rosy her cheek!
Her bosom was white, and her heart it was loyal,-
 Her demeanor was modest, her manner was meek;
But now the pert maidens, who ply in the mill,
 How wan is their visage, - how dim is their eye
For the burden they must bear is enough to chill
 The spring of the heart and to deaden their glee;
To toil for men that are hard to please,
In a hot-bed rank with vice and disease.

And when they speak, it must be with a squeal;

They must rise and run at the toll of a bell,
And brook the insult of a tyrant and devil,

And the jargon they hear is the language of hell.
To breed a young lassie in such a vile place,

Instead of her own father's cot on the green,
It puts the poor thing in a pitiful case -

Ah! black was the day that they made the machine.
It has added more wealth to the hoards of the great
And left those that were low in a far lower state.