WORK, CULTURE AND GENDER:
THE MAKING OF MASCULINITIES IN
POST-WAR LIVERPOOL

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This essay traces the changes and continuities evident in the construction of masculinities in post-war Liverpool. In the decades after the Second World War, full employment and the restructuring of the local labour market had the potential to reshape personal and collective identities. However, the pre-war cultures associated with casualism persisted and were incorporated into class and gendered understandings of manhood. In exploring the construction of local masculinities, particular attention is paid to work and household as significant sites. The writer concludes that economic restructuring did nothing to challenge the power of men relative to women, in either the workplace or the home.

Liverpool people experienced dramatic changes in the two decades following the end of the Second World War. These changes impacted on the making of male identities and, in particular, created new arenas within which local masculinities were constructed and played out. Elsewhere, I have written about the making of masculinity in the North-end dockland communities of inter-war Liverpool and identified employment, family and religion as prominent sites in its construction. In so-doing, I emphasized continuities of experience which stretched back into the mid-nineteenth century, arguing that port employment — the persistence of casualism and the experience of seafaring — constituted a bridge which linked the life, work and culture of nineteenth-century Liverpudlians with that of subsequent generations right up to the outbreak of the Second World War. This essay shifts the focus onto the post-war period and explores some of the myriad ways in which structural changes in the local economy impacted on understandings of manhood.

This analysis of male identity in post-war Liverpool emphasizes the significance of work and household. It highlights the development of a new politicized form of male identity that was self-consciously class-based but was also affected by other influences. These included the experience of war and of national service, the development of Liverpool as an icon of 1960s youth culture and the expansion of material aspirations.
occasioned by socio–economic restructuring, new consumption possibilities and the attachment of real meaning to the concept of breadwinning. Understandings of manhood shifted to accommodate post–war changes and there is evidence of the emergence of new, home–focused constructions of masculinity in some parts of the city. However, traditional features persisted alongside the new and were woven into the gendered identities of local men. Most obviously, the privileges that attached to ownership of a male identity continued to be immutable. What follows untangles some of the key elements in the variously shaped masculinities of post–war Liverpool and explores the implications of these for gender relations inside and outside the home. The consideration of masculinity offered is necessarily selective and concentrates attention on employment and household as prominent sites in its construction. Attention is focused on those Liverpudlians who still lived/had their origins in the North End of the city and who were, for the most part white and Roman Catholic.

The war and immediate post–war years transformed Liverpool. The blitz, the physical separation of husbands and wives, new experiences and pressures, both at home and for those abroad, made an impact far beyond their visible effects. Most obviously, war fractured the intense solidarities, chauvinisms and insularities of pre-war dockland enclaves. In particular, religion, a key site in the making of inter-war masculinities, became much less relevant in terms of collective identity. The bonds of parish and sectarian allegiance were weakened by the war and post-war changes. This is not to say that religious affiliation was no longer significant. Religious prejudices persisted, there continued to be occasional outbreaks of violence around particular events and days and sectarian spatial divisions were often reproduced in local authority rehousing programmes. Moreover, ethno-sectarian links to workplaces were sustained by the recruitment strategies of existing and new employers. Nevertheless, as a key site of collective male identity, religion was much less important than it had been in the 1920s and 30s.

Other changes were more visible. Strategies to address some of the appalling social conditions revealed by wartime evacuation, initiatives to attract industry to the area and to tackle the enormous problem of housing, the registration of dockers and schemes to regularize work bore fruit. Post-war boom in the older industries and the increasing trend for new industries to move to Merseyside, eradicated much of the unemployment of the inter-war years. At the same time, labour demand created new job opportunities for married women. The ending of the marriage bar in local factories and the introduction of part-time work combined to draw married women into the labour market. In addition, slum clearance programmes decanted many thousands of families from inner Liverpool to purpose-built overspill areas on the outskirts. Before the war, for example, 3000 people lived in Kirby; by 1951, the population had grown to 32,140 and, by 1961, there were 52,139 people living in this new town.

However, it is important not to over-emphasize the extent of these changes. Strong threads of continuity were woven into the new post-war tapestry. The physical face of whole areas of the city remained grim. Poor housing, high rents and overcrowding limited the quality of life of many families. In 1951, 30,000 families were on the housing waiting list. In the following twenty years, the demand for council housing consistently outstripped supply. Large families, low wages and ‘traditional’ attitudes towards the allocation of household income persisted and contributed to the poverty clearly visible in many areas of the city.
Continuities and changes impinged on the making of male identities, in particular, by providing new locations within which masculinities were shaped and played out. Three key sites were significant — the traditional waterfront sector, the new fordist factories and the household. In exploring the complexity of male identity in Liverpool, I aim to show that the demands attached to notions of manhood could be contradictory. For individual men, the consequent tensions were, in part, resolved by regarding their respective responsibilities as flexible.

**Employment and masculinity**

Employment provides the starting point for this exploration of masculinities in post-war Liverpool. Work and the workplace were inextricably tied up in the emergence of a new politicized form of male identity and male solidarities which were self-consciously class based. In the context of the pre-war casualized labour market class identity was, in large measure, articulated via the strategies workers used to create some sense of autonomy and control in situations where they actually had very little. Pre-war masculinities delineated the only real power of men, as a collectivity, in terms of gender. This was made formal in the sexual division of labour and played out, on a daily basis, in the home. In the decades after the Second World War, regularization, full employment, trade union membership and the empowerment associated with collective action to improve status, conditions and wages, became part of the existing collectivities of men, that had arisen out of the structured situation of port workers, to produce a notion of manhood, which emphasized working-class male identity. The post-war environment allowed the development of new capacities to be layered into the old. The new empowerment associated with collective self-conscious understandings of themselves as working-class men, was tangible and it brought material advances.

Liverpool was pre-eminently a port economy. After the Second World War, the post-war boom regained for the port some of the export trade it had lost during the inter-war years. Although the number of jobs in the port steadily contracted during the 1950s and 60s, it remained the biggest employer of people. In that brief moment before decline reasserted itself, the waterfront industries offered more to their workers than ever before. With the boom in the port economy, casual workers could work more or less regularly with bottlenecks bringing in higher opportunities for earnings to compensate for leaner periods. On a visit to a docks canteen in 1950, Godfrey Winn was told, 'a Liverpool docker's life today no longer comes under the heading of casual labour. We have 17,000 men working here and their average wage is over seven pounds a week, with overtime.'

For younger men, seafaring was an option, and the new trade buoyancy gave them choice about how long they stayed ashore between trips and enabled them to be selective about the ships they sailed on. In the post-war milieu, pre-war myths about casualism giving workers agency in terms of allowing them to choose not to work if they so wished had real, albeit limited, currency. Workers' views of themselves as powerful were reinforced by, and consolidated in, the increased bargaining power characterized by post-war reconstruction. The actual impact of trades unionism, in terms of practical advances, was limited for seamen by the animosity between members and officials and, for dockers,
by the continued divisions between workers. Nevertheless, the democratic tendency towards breakaway strikes and the achievement of important local concessions, enhanced feelings that workplace organization was empowering waterfront workers as men as much as workers. Capacities expanded and post-war manhood took on an overtly class dimension. Encouraged by the rigidly sex-segmented labour market woven into already existing work-based masculinities, which related manliness to heavy dangerous work and images of strong men who possessed particular skills, a new sense of self emerged which was essentially male.

In the 1950s and 1960s, this maleness incorporated experiences of war. The manhood of those returning from serving abroad in the army or the merchant service had been tested in the most overt way. Men brought back with them heightened expectations for a better life and of the rewards owed to them as men:

you came back and saw all the damage, you saw what was left and I thought to myself, they’ll be sick because all of this just can’t be put back together the way it was, everything’ll have to be new, there’d be a revolution if there wasn’t. We weren’t going to put up with things like our old fellas did, no way. It seems soft now, but I felt I’d fought for my country — they kept saying that was what you’d done — and now it was pay back time. And the free hospitals and all that seemed to be the start of it [...] the war cost me a big chunk of my life, I had a lot to make up.  

Outside of war, the demands of national service meant that large numbers of young men also had the experience of army discipline, travel and enforced mixing with men from other parts of the country. J. B. Mays wrote:

[Liverpool] boys gradually acquire status through a series of graded steps. These steps corresponded to actual phases of their lives when they feel conscious of themselves moving forwards and upwards in their world. Going to school and work for the first time are obvious examples but there are a number of subsidiary advances marked by such things as going into long trousers, smoking a cigarette, drinking a pint of beer. The period of most complete emancipation is often reached when a boy leaves home at eighteen to serve in the forces and finally emerges as a man in a man’s world.

Moreover, the tendency of young dockland men to ship abroad for at least a few years, was as evident after as before the war. The ‘traditions and practices of seafarers diffused through the dockland districts’. Alan Johnson argues, ‘Liverpudlians felt themselves and their city to be important on the world stage, with world horizons and seafaring culture became the ideal, the role model, the common sense; footloose free-spoken, respecting only those who earned it, loyal to equals, consuming riches when ashore’. Tony Lane qualifies, ‘Of course the practice contained only the merest fraction of the colourful promise — but then the truth of the matter was utterly irrelevant [...] the stories represented an account of the “sort of people we are”. The meaning was [...] in the contribution every “event” made to an overall picture of a man’s life’. The breaking-up of old dockland communities, rehousing programmes and new work opportunities implied a relocation of large numbers of seafarers and dock workers, and those who had grown up in the waterfront areas, bringing dockland cultures and attitudes into the new districts. There was, though, no necessarily direct line between previous employment and workplace attitudes. Indeed, when the Ford motor company began recruitment in 1963, it actively discriminated against the very young, building
workers, dockers, seamen, the unemployed or anyone from industries with a history of trades union activity. However, the pre-war dominance of casualism had so conditioned outlook and behaviour, that casually constructed culture remained a force, even among those who had not worked within the system. The movement into new industry was not an easy one for either workers or employers. Recruits to the new industries brought with them sea-informed understandings of themselves as men with value who carried an innate suspicion of employers, formal politics and national trade union leadership. Challenges to the imposition of new disciplines were often articulated in a particularly Liverpudlian manner.

Even though unemployment in Liverpool was persistently higher than in other parts of the country, local men were not cowed by the threat of job loss. The proliferation of recruitment advertisements in local newspapers, the ability of many young men and women to move between jobs, seemingly at will, and the visibility of new factories on the periphery encouraged resistance. This manifested itself in a range of ways but much resistance was individual rather than organized. An absence of formal labour movement participation does not necessarily imply a lack of political awareness or an acquiescent, malleable workforce. This is supported by the tendency of local workers to ‘walk out’.

One contemporary study identified a labour turnover of twenty-two per cent in some of the new factories, ‘Clearly, high pay does not always compensate for unamenable conditions [...] illustrating the problems of bringing a different sort of production to an area.’ Indeed, as in casualism, the right to withhold labour remained the ultimate sanction in terms of offering a principled response to perceived injustice. As one woman recalled of her husband, ‘He’d walk off the job at the drop of a hat [...] his mate — not him, mind you, had been picked on for something or other and he’d stepped in.’ Madeleine Kerr, similarly noted the propensity of young workers to move between jobs; ‘Personal likes and dislikes play a large part [...]. If he feels any injustice has been done to him, he immediately walks out. He sees no alternative behaviour as possible.’

Leaving was not, though, the only expression of resistance. Stories abound of how men challenged the discipline of the factory and the authority of supervisors and managers from outside the area. Some are undoubtedly apocryphal. Outright challenges would often result in dismissal but industrial sabotage and other forms of covert defiance were evident. Writing of local workers’ attempts to subvert production line discipline, Richard Meegan argued, ‘while not unique to the workers on Merseyside, the general view seemed to be that these tactics were more highly developed in the area because of its history of insecure employment’. Managers at Fords struggled to impose factory time on their workers. Late in 1965, the Company sent out a warning to 2600 employees, threatening the future of the factory after ‘absenteeism doubled over the previous year’. The same week, the Leader of Liverpool City Council offered to mediate between representatives of Ac Delco (a motor components manufacturer) and employees over the same issue. Persuading men to come in on Mondays and Fridays was a particular problem for local firms.

The persistence of a moral economy of casualism that permeated into the new fordist industrial setting was also evident in strategies to subvert the new disciplines in ways more closely associated with dock work. For example, the practice of the welt was transported into some of the shops at Ford’s with men on night shift covering for each other while they took time out to sleep, play cards or attend the blue movie cinema set up by one enterprising individual.
Relative to old port related work, the new labour processes associated with conveyor belt production, were not ‘manly’ in the accepted sense of the word but the conversion of practices of male bonding associated with the traditional sector into the new industrial setting, enabled the parameters of masculinity to be shifted to accommodate the new work forms. Despite the obvious differences between the two, what bound them together and secured their place as key sites of male identity was the continued division of the labour market into segments based on sex. The gendered nature of much of the new work provided confirmation, if any were needed, of the workplace as an exclusively male milieu. The world outside work could be equally masculinist. Access to regular work and wages added a new dimension to the making of male identity.

As the 1950s moved into the 1960s and the decade unravelled itself, Liverpool became an icon of a new age. The success of the Beatles and a handful of other local bands offered new role models, added fuel to existing aspirations and, increasingly, linked male identity and competitiveness to consumer acquisitiveness. Clearly, there was a generational dimension to this process. During the 1960s, in the space between leaving school and marriage, the possession of fashionable clothes, records and guitars and enough pocket money to pay for nights out in city centre clubs, became vital elements in male identity. Material goods offered new possibilities for personal expression and the forging of inter-male relationships. This was especially so in relation to the almost exclusively male domain of making music.

By the mid 1960s, the city had been placed centre stage because of the talent, wit and irreverence of the Beatles, the dominance of Liverpool music, its idiom, independence of spirit and the perceived militancy of the workplace. The Beatle-inspired rise in Liverpool’s prestige was mirrored, with uncanny synchronicity, by the astonishing ascent of Bill Shankly’s Liverpool football team. Television, theatre and the arts fell in behind the Hit Parade by filling up with Liverpudlian performers and celebrations of the city’s supposed qualities: funny, tough, egalitarian.

All of this was persuasive myth making and fed back on itself, enhancing the status and confidence of Liverpool men who strutted in the male world of informal trade union activity: at strike meetings, in the shop floor led groups which planned actions, in the politics-informed discussions which took place in the dockers club, pubs and factory canteens in ways which emphasized and encouraged local manly self-esteem. These were men who knew their place in the world — would not be told what to do, were leading, or so the myth went, the British working classes, into a new post-war world that put Liverpool manhood at centre stage. In hindsight, we can see how fragile all of this was — the limited power gained during the period was slipping away even as it made itself felt but, for the moment, the belief in its endurance supported a strengthened post-war sense of manhood across the whole of the city.

This is not to say that manhood took a common form. Divisions on the basis of age, skill, occupation, religion, ethnicity and sexuality cut across male solidarities. Most obviously, perhaps, this new collectivity of men in confrontation with capital was exclusive and did not include local black men. Despite the projected image of Liverpool as a city dominated by a sense of social justice, racism has always been an integral feature of local culture. Discrimination on the basis of skin colour in access to both work and leisure, circumscribed the lives and choices of generations of Liverpool-born black men and women. Post-war rehousing programmes, city council and industrial recruitment
strategies and attitudes of trades unionists, which reflected those of the wider local popu-
lation, ensured that pre-war structural constraints on black progress became even more
strongly embedded in post-war society. During the 1950s and 60s, the possession of
white skin was an additional factor in construction of white masculinities; the corollary
of this was the construction of parallel black masculinities that had to accommodate the
limitations racism implied.

Whilst accurate, though, this dichotomy is somewhat simplistic. For the most part,
Liverpool's black population was mixed race. This meant that extended families usually
included white as well as black members and kinship ties could cut across race and give
individuals access to opportunities that would not otherwise be possible — most obvi­
ously in access to work. Further, although the local black population was concentrated in
Liverpool 8, this did not comprise an exclusively black community. Black and white boys
 schooled together and friendships that transcended racial barriers and emphasized
common points of identity, which arose out of local experience and cultures, were often
carried into adulthood. Thus, within the area, manliness could accommodate differences
in skin colour, without compromising the masculinity of either black or white men.
Nevertheless, in terms of collective male identity, skin colour remained significant.

Overall, then, on a surface level, the economic restructuring which took place in
post-war Liverpool implied a dilution of the key factors which had contributed to male
identity before the War. The contrasts were dramatic — from outdoor labour which
hardened men to work in all conditions to the protected environment of indoor factory
work, where blacked-out windows made it impossible to tell night from day; from
heavy, dangerous work on docks and ships to the comparative safety of conveyor belt
production; from the relative autonomy implied by casualism to the control of factory
discipline and shift work — and these changes appeared to create masculinities different
from those which were embedded in the traditional sectors of the port economy. How­
ever, the ability of masculinity to remake itself in order to accommodate change without
damaging men's sense of themselves as true men served to ensure that, despite the altered
nature of work environments, the experience of manliness persisted. Further, exploration
of post-war masculinities at the interface of household income and expenditure decisions
offers additional evidence of the ability of men, in the face of structural changes, to
shift the parameters of male identity to avoid sacrificing any of the prerogatives which
accompanied it.

Household and masculinity

The concept of masculinity which emphasized the domestic role of men was a complex
one. In his study of inter-war Salford, Andrew Davies has written of, 'competing notions
of masculinity' — the competing ideals of men as both family providers and as autono­
mous beings who had, by their labour, earned the right to different ways of experiencing
and proving their manhood'. Marriage and fatherhood offered evidence of manhood
that was substantiated by the acceptance of responsibility for the maintenance of wives
and children and was encapsulated in the title of breadwinner. In terms of men's relation­
ship to household and family, the fundamental change that separated the husbands and
fathers of the post-war world from those who went before was that, for the first time,
the title of breadwinner had a literal meaning. Full employment, access to regular and predictable wages and improvements in real wage levels made breadwinning a realistic aspiration for local men. However, these material advances did not necessarily imply improvements in terms of families’ access to the wage men earned.

The breadwinning notion of masculinity incorporated elements that seem contradictory. The support of families was regarded as a duty but not an obligation. The money men earned was their own to give over or withhold as they so wished. Indeed, this control was itself an important component in the complex embodiment of male identity. J. B. Mays said of local men:

One of the most disturbing factors is the social immaturity of many of the young men who by the age of twenty or so are not only husbands but fathers. So many [...] have little idea of the degree of adjustment demanded by the marital relationship or the sacrifices entailed in parenthood. The amount of personal spending money a young man requires is often staggeringly high, many of them demand half their earnings, the equivalent of the whole expenditure of the family housekeeping.47

This was not particular to Liverpool. F. Zweig, in his 1952 study of the British worker wrote, ‘If you have no spending money you might as well be dead is the common opinion of workers [...]. Spending money is the key to the freedom desired by the worker.’48

Although as Kerr showed, Liverpool wives and mothers were often strong and localities were robustly matrifocal,49 this rarely challenged the power of married men over the destiny of the wage they earned.50 As Mays found:

The home, in certain important respects was male dominated. The husband and father qua wage earner is the economic master who decides how much goes for housekeeping and how much he will keep for his own personal use. The way in which the housekeeping money is spent is largely the woman’s field but he will expect her to give him adequate meals and the standard of comfort he requires.51

There was nothing new in this. Strong threads of cultural continuity united the decades after the war with those before.52 However, in the years after the war, the potential for domestic conflict over the destiny of the wage increased. The anthropologists, Douglas and Isherwood, have argued that consumption carries meaning over and above the basic need/desire for goods. In particular, that people used goods as markers, to send messages to others about the sort of people they are.53 The problem with regard to household income, is that the messages family members want to send might be very different in terms of age and/or gender — men, women and children may want/need different things. If ‘consumption is about power’,54 then focussing on family consumption can highlight the relative powerfulness of individual family members.

One case perhaps serves to make the point. The Murphy children, growing up in the north end of the city in the 1950s were continually disappointed by their mother’s apparent total lack of concern for their desire to have what other children had. One of the boys, for example, was a good footballer — a member of the school team — but his mother would only ever buy him very worn, second hand football boots, only replaced when in pieces and after much pleading. With hindsight, his childhood judgement of her as hard and mean has been tempered: ‘she just didn’t have it, it was a question of food.
on the table or boots for me and the food won every time’. In theory, however, this mother of eight children had never been so well off in her life. Her seaman husband had fewer gaps between trips than before the war. The allotment he sent home was modest but regular, one of her daughters was married and two of her sons were working and contributing most of what they earned to the family purse. She herself was working part-time as a cleaner in a private house. Her essential problem though, was that her husband’s ‘marking’ services and ‘needs’ did not coincide with hers. Each time he paid off after a trip, traditional neighbourhood and kin expectations of treating, partying and general profligacy for as long as the money lasted, took precedence over the longer-term needs of his family. Within a fortnight of returning home, the gifts he had brought were in the pawnshop and Mrs Murphy, her regular income reduced because she got no allotment while he was home, was getting increasingly into debt because he was another mouth to feed and his kit for the next trip had to be repaired or bought anew.

Of course, it is impossible to generalize from one family but the potential conflict of interests illustrated by this example is reproduced time and time again in memories of the post-war decades. I have written elsewhere of the inadequacy of assumptions about the destiny of money earned by men.

In inter-war Liverpool, the casual nature of much available work, allied to high unemployment rates, made access to information systems via local networks crucial. For many men, participation in these networks was dependent upon their ability to ‘pay their way’. After the War, the regularization of work should, in theory, have broken down such dependency but by this time, the situation described was an inherent part of male culture. The experience of war and national service reinforced this by accustoming men to a certain level of spending for personal leisure and emphasized the pleasure that could be gained from the company of male friends. As Zweig noted, ‘Separate a man from his home and his “sundries” [personal expenses] will rise rapidly […] enjoyment is usually enhanced by company. The extension of leisure and amusements strengthens group life but weakens family life’.

In addition, because rehousing programmes broke up the tightly knit, dockland neighbourhoods and workers in the industries located there were increasingly living apart from their work mates, a degree of socializing after leaving work was necessary to maintain relationships and keep one’s place in the work gang. In situations, where a family had been rehoused but the man continued to return to the older area to work, the potential for conflict increased. The demands associated with new housing expanded and changed the actual and social needs of families. At the same time, the way in which households measured the worth of each other in the absence of historically informed local knowledge, was limited to what could be seen — standards of cleanliness, care of children and material possessions. Men who worked and socialized outside the area where they lived felt under less pressure to conform to, or participate in, these new expressions of family status.

For men who lived and worked in the new areas their new personal marking needs coincided with wives’ to a much greater extent and their involvement in manly elements of homemaking such as DIY and gardening were sewn into the masculinities associated with the new industries, perhaps even leading men into competition with each other around the possession of material goods. Thus, the satisfaction of consumption needs was not always a source of tension between men and women. They might equally be part of a mutually worked out plan to improve the whole family’s standard of living:
I think people had more chance to get on in the world, there were more things available so people make the effort to get them. The men would work overtime to get that bit more money to get all these little extra things that you didn’t have when you were younger or that you didn’t have during the war. Things were becoming more available. Each generation has done better. We both had hard times when we were little and so we wanted it better for our children [...]. You had such austerity during the war that once the 1950s came and you saw these things coming into the shops you wanted them and so you worked and the men worked hard to get that extra bit of money to get all these luxuries which we couldn’t get before.  

The evidence suggests, however, that this sort of consensus was related, in particular, to the sort of work the husband engaged in; that it was men who were working in the newer industries who were most likely to engage in mutual expenditure with their wives. Although in these families money was usually allocated in the same way as in families where the men worked in more traditional port industries (that is with men having pretty standard amounts of pocket money and keeping hold of overtime, bonus and tips for their own spending), it is clear that there was agreement that a proportion of the household income should go to improve the general comfort and status of all by engaging in the purchase of household goods. The relationship of this to local labour markets is two-fold. Firstly, the new industries themselves brought changes. With relative security of employment and a regular income, planning expenditure was far more viable. Also, new estates offered fewer opportunities for informal social contact and, in any case factory employment, by enabling men to socialize with each other at regular meal and tea breaks and during illicit time snatched from the production line, made contact in free time less necessary. In addition, it was less likely that workmates would be part of the sort of tight network of male social relations, reinforced by work but welded together by male kinship and socializing outside the workplace, which persisted in the older dockland communities. Secondly, the availability of work for women living in the new areas, allied to the separation of families from traditional kinship supports of an everyday nature meant that men increasingly had to take on a more active role in domestic matters, such as childcare, in order for women to take advantage of improved opportunities to earn.

However, it is important not to over-emphasize the degree of consensus this analysis implies. Changes in attitudes generally lag behind changes in social conditions. As suggested above, the new work disciplines imposed by new industry were not simply accepted without question. Changes within the home were similarly subject to a complex process of negotiation and renegotiation of the domestic division of labour which varied from household to household but only very rarely impinged upon ‘traditional’ attitudes to housework and child care, ‘He was very good, very good, you can’t take that away from him. I couldn’t have done it without him [gone out to work] not when the children were young [...] He’d clear up after the tea, see them to bed and that and tidy round and rub their things through — socks and that. He was very, very, good’. Nevertheless, this woman had completed all her usual housework, shopped and prepared the evening meal before she left the house. For most women, involvement in paid work outside the home multiplied their burden even in situations where men ‘helped out’.

Of course, what I am arguing for here are tendencies; human behaviour does not fit itself tidily into crude categories and individual examples contest such reductionism. A southerner, commenting on differences between industrial relations negotiations between Ford workers in Dagenham and Halewood, said of the latter, ‘They’re not as materialistic
as the people in the South [...]. The men are much more independent of their wives: they drink more [and] go and watch football. Joseph Murray was a docker. In 1959, he, his wife and six children were relocated from the inner city to a very nice area some three miles away. Joe embraced suburban living, spending most of his spare time decorating and gardening to turn the house into ‘a palace’. However, individual cases represent interesting asides but do little to counter the argument that whatever the predominant features of the local labour market, whatever the specific inter-familial relationships identified, the choice about how to behave remained with men because the dominant structures continued to prioritize male privilege.

Kanter has argued that masculinity draws strength from patriarchy on a day-to-day basis — that patriarchy creates the structure which allows dominance to be particularly fluid, to the extent that men absorb the right to dominate as a personal trait but the choice about whether or not to exert the power to which they have access is highly individualized. Clearly, though, patriarchy is not the only force at work. Roberts et al., emphasize the ‘consequences for family and community relationships of localized patterns of economic change’ and Doreen Massey has argued that gender identities are rooted in labour market structures and that patriarchy adapts to different forms of economic development to ensure the maintenance of male dominance. Nowhere is this more evident than within the changed industrial landscape of post-war Liverpool.

Bleitrach and Chenu offer the possibility of an even more nuanced interpretation of local life in this period. They suggest that, ‘working-class practices organized as coherent constellations constitute industrial lifestyles’ and that the nature of these lifestyles is contingent on the ‘type of production processes, the type of ownership of capital and the type of labour force with its distinct history’. In the decades after the end of the Second World War, restructuring offered possibilities for the development of new industrial lifestyles, however, these possibilities were mediated in a variety of ways. In particular, patriarchy reshaped itself to accommodate new situations and aspirations. In the same way that a kaleidoscope offers new patterns with each turn whilst keeping all the tiny mosaic pieces within the drum, there were perceptible changes in local behaviour — lifestyles visibly altered — but the structure persisted.

If the introduction of new industry to Merseyside in the two decades following war seemed to offer local families a more secure and predictable basis for reproduction than had previously been the case, its translation into actual benefits remained contingent on the good will of the main breadwinners. At the end of the day, the choice about how to distribute the wage a man earned remained his prerogative. The embodiment of masculinity, as it had always done, in men’s right to prioritize their own needs over those of their families if they so wished. This right was made tangible in the conceptual understandings of good husbands and in the extent to which post-war masculinity continued to legitimate domestic violence and the threat of it as a mechanism of control. Most men were fair, even generous, in allocating the wage earned and most men did not attack their wives but, crucially, the choice about both remained with men.

In the 1950s and 1960s a multitude of factors combined to produce the masculinities evident in Liverpool, although these could be differently weighted and carry different consequences in different parts of the city and in different social and industrial milieux. Post-war restructuring brought opportunities for the embracing of new identities and collectivities but old structures of power persisted and were layered into the new, giving
Liverpool men a sense of self that had a particularly local slant. 'Gender inequality [...] like all historical constructs [...] is an expression of human interests and rationalities.' Ultimately, economic restructuring did nothing to challenge the status, privileges, rights and priorities of men relative to women in either the workplace or the home.

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References


3 There is no space here to discuss the multitude of ways that this fracturing was experienced and made evident. Although pre-war dockland communities are often nostalgically recalled as safe spaces where bonds of neighbourliness and kinship ensured the survival of all, they could equally be experienced as prisons that circumscribed the fulfilment of aspirations. See P. Ayers, *The Liverpool Docklands. Life and Work in Athol Street*, Liverpool, Docklands History Books, 1986. Work in progress, ‘The Economics of Daily Life; Gender, Household and Community in Interwar Liverpool’ attempts to address the complexity of inter-war dockland experience.

4 This is simplifying a very complex process that there is no space to discuss properly here. It is important to remember, though, that while sectarianism was such an important pre-war factor in local politics and in personal and collective identity, for most men, religion was about allegiance rather than belief and its relative importance was shaped by its relationship to other key sites in the construction of masculinity. See Ayers, ‘The making’, pp. 75–9.


This was, for Liverpool, a relative concept. Even in the good years of the 1950s and 1960s, unemployment was two-and-a-half times the national average. R. Nabarro, ‘The impact on workers from the inner city of Liverpool’s economic decline’, in A. Evans and D. Eversley (eds), The Inner City. Employment and Industry, London, Heinemann, 1980, p. 308.

This was not simply a consequence of reconstruction. There is no space here to discuss the ways in which both the masculinities and class capacities of workers still living in the dockland zones were strengthened by neighbourhood and kinship ties outside the workplace.


Lane, Liverpool, chs 3 and 4.


Ayers, ‘The making’.

Interview with LD, born 1921. His emphasis. Interview testimony used in this essay is drawn from two sources. References marked DHP are taken from interviews conducted by the team of the Leverhulme-funded Docklands History Project, which was located jointly in the Departments of Economic History and Sociology, University of Liverpool, 1986–1990. Other references are from interviews conducted by Pat Ayers as part of ongoing research.


J. B. Mays, Growing Up in the City, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, p. 87, note 1.

Lane, Liverpool, p. 148.

Ibid., p. 82.


Lane, Liverpool, pp. 108–9.

Ibid., p. 116.


Although between 1945–71, restructuring created 94,000 new manufacturing jobs, between 1961–71, 50,000 jobs were lost to the city and unemployment was twice the national average over the whole period. See, Nabarro, ‘The impact’, pp. 295–6, 308. Liverpool Daily Post, 19 July 1962, demanded action over the ‘Kirby workless’ complaining that many firms who had relocated to Liverpool were not employing local people.


Interview with PW born 1940.

Kerr, The People, p. 68. Also, Mays, Growing, p. 100.

Beynon, Working, p. 45.

Ibid., pp. 139–43. This was not particular to Liverpool. On Glasgow, see T. Nicholls and P. Armstrong, Workers Divided, Glasgow, Fontana, 1976. On understanding the various ways in which employees might respond to work discipline see, G. Mars, Cheats at Work; An Anthropology of Workplace Crime, London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1982. For a short discussion of the relevance of workplace theft to the formation of masculinity, see Morgan, Discovering, p. 89.


Interview with SR born 1931 and SER born 1955.

Bill Osgerby identifies a similar process in 1950s and 60s America. B. Osgerby, Playboys in Paradise; Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-style in Modern America, Oxford, Berg, 2001, p. 3.


Research is needed into the experiences of post-war settlers from South Asia, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe.

There is a great deal of work to be undertaken into the formal and informal racially exclusionary alliances forged between capital and labour. See, Liverpool Youth Organisations Committee, *Special but not Separate*, Liverpool: LYOC, 1968; Nabarro, ‘The impact’, pp. 316–17.


Ibid., p. 45.

Mays, *Growing*, p. 86.


Ibid., p. 89.

All Murphy material is drawn from a collective interview with GR and siblings, born between 1936 and 1948.


This is not to say that casualism disappeared. See Salt, ‘The impact’, pp. 255–64.


For example, by the mid 1970s, the inner city parish of St Francis Xavier, ‘which used to house 13,000 Roman Catholics had, through demolition and dispersal, fallen to 900’. Warlock and Sheppard, *Better*, p. 44.

Not universally. Individual examples challenge this analysis as shown below.

DHP Interview with AH, born 1929.

There are obvious exceptions to this. Young shop stewards at Fords ‘ate their meals together in the works canteens, drank together after meetings. They were friends’. But, arguably, their relationship to the workplace made this more necessary. Beynon, *Working*, p. 74.


Interview with JC, born 1926.


Interview with LM born 1926. The family moved, though, into an established and very respectable community rather than a new estate.


