

Early Industrial Society: Progress or Decline?

Peter Stearns and Herrick Chapman

One of the most persistent debates over the early stages of the Industrial Revolution is whether a higher standard of living resulted for factory workers. A number of "optimistic" historians, relying primarily on statistical evidence such as wage rates, prices, and mortality rates, have argued that even during the early period factory workers experienced a rising standard of living. A group of more "pessimistic" historians, emphasizing qualitative data such as descriptions of the psychological, social, and cultural impact of the factory on workers' lives, argues that the standard of living declined for these workers during the first half of the nineteenth century. In the following selection Peter Stearns and Herrick Chapman focus on this debate, concluding that, at least for many workers, material conditions were modestly better.

The question of whether conditions deteriorated or were improved by early factory employment has been hotly debated, particularly in the case of the British industrial revolution. There is evidence on both sides. Many have tried to prove that early industry was evil; others have asserted its beneficence. Even during the Industrial Revolution itself the question was argued with much partisan feeling: The issue is not merely an academic one. In order to understand the workers themselves, it is vital to know whether they experienced a deterioration in conditions as they entered industry. That the workers were in misery from a modern point of view cannot be denied; that they were severely limited in their conditions is obvious; but whether they felt themselves to be miserable, judging by the standards they knew, is far from clear. . . .

Furthermore, in England and elsewhere, rural conditions had usually been declining before the Industrial Revolution began. This was, after all, the main impulse for peasants to accept factory jobs. Peasant standards of living were low anyway; preindustrial society was simply poor. And the people entering industry were often drawn from the lowest categories of the peasantry. These were the people who suffered most from expanding population and declining domestic industry. There was deterioration of material conditions in the early industrial period, but it occurred primarily in the countryside among the landless and the domestic producers and among the unskilled in the slums of cities like London. When they found factory employment, workers seldom could note a significant worsening of their situation: many factory workers actually gained some ground in standard of living.

The worst problem for factory workers, as for the poorer classes even in premodern times, was the instability of conditions. Sick workers were rarely paid and sometimes lost their jobs. With age workers' skill and strength declined, and so did their earnings. Old workers, lacking property to fall back on, suffered from falling wages and frequent unemployment. Machine breakdowns caused days and even weeks of unemployment. Most important, recurrent industrial slumps plunged many workers into profound misery. Wages fell, sometimes by as much as 50 percent; up to a quarter of the labor force lost their jobs. Some returned to the countryside to seek work or to roam in bands to find food. Some survived on charity; the charity rolls of manufacturing cities often embraced over half the working class, though only meager support was offered. Some sold

or pawned their possessions. All reduced expenses by eating potatoes instead of bread and ignoring rent payments. Old age, finally, could bring disaster. Working-class life was thus punctuated by a number of personal and general crises, creating a sense of insecurity that haunted workers even in better times.

In prosperous years the worst feature of the average worker's material standard of living was housing. Rural cottages had often been flimsy and small, befouled by animals, but city housing was sometimes worse. . . .

With poor housing and urban crowding, along with the pressures of factory work itself, many workers were in poor health. Rates of infant mortality were high, and many workers had a life expectancy at birth only half as high as that of their employers. . . .

Unquestionably factory wages were better than those of the countryside. Highly skilled male workers, many of them former artisans, were paid three to six times as much as ordinary laborers. For early mechanization did not eliminate the need for skill, though it reduced the percentage of skilled workers and changed the skills required. Hence the men who built and installed machines or puddled iron or ran the more complex spinning machines required years to learn their trade fully. But even lesser-skilled workers could command a money wage that was higher than what was available in the countryside or to the transient workers of the cities. There was little left over for purchases beyond food, housing, and clothing. A bit of tobacco or a small contribution to a mutual aid group were all that the ordinary worker could afford. However, wages tended to go up with time. They definitely rose in England after 1840. The main factory centers in France saw an increase in real wages in the 1830s and 1840s, and there was improvement in Germany in the 1840s and 1850s, in Russia in the 1890s.

So it is safe to conclude that material conditions, though bad, provided modest gains and some solace for many workers during the early industrial period as a whole. On the average, conditions were better than the new workers' traditions had led them to expect.