

The Contribution of Child Labor in the Industrial Revolution in Britain

During the 1800s the Industrial Revolution spread throughout Britain. The use of steam-powered machines led to a massive increase in the number of factories, particularly textiles factories. As the number of factories grew, the demand for laborers increased rapidly. Many industries began hiring children to participate in wage labour and subsequently ignited the debate on child labour which continues today. Opponents of child labour practices perceive these employers as exploitative oppressors. This view has been characterized in literature such as *Oliver Twist*, which provided the reading audience with a deeply critical social commentary on child labour and the plight of child poverty. E. P. Thompson characterizes the European Industrial Revolution during 19th century as “the exploitation of little children [and] one of the most shameful events in our history”. However, this does not account for the fact that children were regarded as a source of labour well before the industrial revolution. Child participation in the production of goods was naturalized in rural settings, where children learned their roles and life skills while helping their parents with daily tasks. Most children were expected to help with household chores, work in the fields, or to inherit the family business by learning a trade as they worked. The new factory system created the demand for child labour outside the domestic environment and brought them into the low skilled, wage economy. The children were no longer working while they learned to be adults, but were expected to work as adults.

Although critics argue that child laborers are the victims of the capitalist drive for increasing material gains, they cannot deny that during the Industrial Revolution children were fundamental to the establishment of a new British economy which enjoyed

mechanization and modernization. This paper will therefore focus on the contribution child laborers made to the British economy during the Industrial Revolution in the form of greater industrial output, higher national income, and improved living standards for British working class families. Exploring these contributions may bring a greater respect to the sacrifices these children made.

Between 1780 and 1831, the population of Britain nearly tripled, and in places like Bolton the population “increased from 5,000 to 43,000” (Marjorie Cruickshank, p11). A large percentage of this rapidly growing population was composed of children and teenagers, especially within industrial towns: “9[i]n 1821 49 per cent of Britain’s population was less than twenty years of ages” (Eric J. Evans. p123). The growing population increased the demand for almost everything and bolstered economic growth. This immediately created higher demand for more labourers in centers of mass production, and factories began to hire children as labourers because the machines of production no longer required the physical strength or skilled experience of adults.

By combining child and adult labour with the power of machines, Britain achieved greater outputs and became the factory capital of the world during the Industrial Revolution. The increased output not only increased economic growth but also raised the general wage rate of the working class; the national income increased from five hundred million pounds in 1750 to 25 hundred million pounds in 1833 (L. S. Stavrianos, p227). Research reveals that from 1755 until 1851, the nominal wage of people at all levels of the working class increased distinctly (Peter H. Lindert & Jeffrey G. Williamson, 1983). Moreover, the larger quantity of production drove down the price of most commercial goods, especially cotton goods. The lower price of goods and the rise in the nominal wage resulted in a general increase in the real wage. Studies show the “improvements in real wages between 1750 and 1850 varying from

150 per cent to nil” (Eric, p150), while cost of living declined. There is no doubt that the participation of children in the economy contributed to this improvement.

From a critical Marxist perspective, child labor is seen as a crime of capitalism because children’s cheaper labour lowers adults’ average wage; what was previously one’s worker’s wage comes to be shared by a whole family. This would generate larger profits for capitalists, who “must be able to exploit children: that is, he must be able to pay them less than the value of what they produce” (Clark Nardinelli, p81). This stance would be more valid if capitalists were only looking at children as a resource to decrease overhead costs and increase profit margins. However, this motive may be displaced when the complex aspects of economic growth are taken into consideration. That is, capitalists were in search of labourers to meet the production demands of a growing population and a burgeoning new economy, and child labour helped to meet this demand. Changes during the Industrial Revolution tended to be structural rather than technological, requiring labour-intensive rather than capital-intensive work to increase industrial output, resulting in a great increase in the need for general labourers. Further, research shows that “the employment of children in some areas may have been more of a response to high wages and opportunities than a means of driving down adult wage” (Clark, p82).

The foundation of child labour, then, lies in areas where wages and a shortage of adult workers created opportunities for children to contribute to their families and economies. Additionally, certain jobs were considered more suited to the physical stature of children. For example, jobs that required a person to crouch in a small space for a long time might cause an adult discomfort, but a child to perform the job easily. Textile employers often claimed “children must start at an early age while their fingers were nimble or they would never become skilled workers” (Marjorie, p18). By the end of 1830s, children under the age of

fourteen formed a fifth or a sixth of the total workforce in textile towns (Eric, p152). It can be argued that children were not considered viable only as cheap labourers, but also that they played a vital role in a labour market where opportunities for the entire population were abundant.

Accusations that children were exploited for capital gains during the Industrial Revolution often do not take into account the economic realities of the time. Many children worked not only to help their families make a living wage, but because it was their time to do so; many child labourers were of the age where they would naturally be learning the skills they would later need for their livelihood, such as planting, harvesting, cooking, and weaving. Many ancestral family farms had been lost, and the children who would have worked on these farms did not have access to formal schooling, so they simply took their place in the factories learning to earn a wage. Under these conditions, child labour gave children an opportunity to help ease the financial burden of their families and in some cases, possibly allowed them to live independently without resorting to criminal activities.

According to the Becker model, the cost of raising a child is viewed as the central cost of the household production system (Clark, p37-38). In the 1800s, a large family was defined as one with three or more children. In a situation where none of the children were working, parents would have had to produce more than twice as much as they consumed in order to meet the needs of their family. This ratio was difficult for parents to bare, and children were thus seen as a resource – capable of offsetting the family burden: “in the proto-industrial family, fathers may have contributed as little as one-quarter to family income” (Horrell, S. & Humphries, J.). As most peasants had lost access to their lands, they were more willing to send their child to the factories and factory work quickly became a major source of income for both adults and children. Some studies show that children’s

contribution to family income was “a third of total income” (Horrell, S & Humphries, J), so if children were not working the family would suffer two-fold: losing income and having to provide for the child’s cost of living. The family income was often comprised of fathers’ and childrens’ earnings, because mothers needed to stay home with any younger children. Therefore, child labourers were not only paying their own way in the world, but also working to sustain younger siblings. Further, girl children often contributed to the work at home by taking on childcare and domestic duties before they were old enough to do factory work, so the mother could find wage work outside the home.

Studies also show that the income of child labourers (boys in particular) tended to be higher than people today would expect: “Between 1810 and 1819 children of ten in Manchester earned between 2s6d and 3s a week and those fourteen about 7s6d” (Marjorie, p19); in general children earned between “one-third and one-sixth of their adult male counterparts”, and their wages were equal to the wages of adult woman. Since children were considered ideal for working in the textile industry, “family income for textile workers almost certainly exceeded the cost of living” (Eric, p122-123, p152). Even younger children who could not do adult jobs were able to contribute a few pence to the family, which would provide for necessities like food. Thus, it was not the factories which forced the children to work, but many social forces: family need; separation from rural agriculture and trade; lack of formal education; need to acquire living skills; and most importantly, the opportunity to escape poverty. To assume that the accumulation of profits was central to the rise of child labour dismisses these children’s desire to help their families and gain employable skills.

The contribution of child labor affected more than just the economic standing of Britian’s working class families during the Industrial Revolution, as it had a positive influence on other aspects of society. A study of children at the height of the revolution shows

that “Manchester factory children aged thirteen to seventeen were from 3.7 to 6.2 centimeters taller than the children in national sample”. This contradicts the belief that children working in factories were in poorer health than children who did not work in factories and suggests that the “low stature of factory children was not the result of their being exploited by other sectors of the population; it was the result of the general poverty and malnourishment of the British working classes” (Clark, p81). The health of working children may have been due to their wages, which allowed their families to afford a higher quality and quantity of food than those working class families whose children were not employed. These statistics may also reflect the fact that employers tended to hire the taller, stronger, and thus healthier children for factory work. Furthermore, British life expectancy increased during early 19th century, and was relatively higher than that of other European countries. This could be the outcome of not only the discovery of several new medical cures, but also of the regular medical attention that was available at factories due to social pressure to provide children with safer working conditions and better healthcare. The increased medical presence in factories benefited adult workers as well, and the care they received did not increase family expenses. Adults and children not working in factories did not receive the same level of care, and many urban districts did not have dispensaries or hospitals (Marjorie, p33, p26, p44). This does not dispute the fact that working conditions were still unhealthy and unsafe, but rather shows that factories offered resources that were not otherwise available to the working class public.

There is also evidence that working conditions may have been more favorable to children than living conditions. Migration to industrial towns boomed during the Industrial revolution: “by 1861, there were, for example, almost 120 to the acre in the Manchester township and 140 in Hulme” (Marjorie, 47). Cities’ inability to predict and accommodate the demands that a growing population would make on urban infrastructures often led to conditions of poor sanitation and risks to public health. In Irish industrial towns, people often

kept farm animals with them in their living quarters. Overcrowded and unsanitary conditions were the major cause of disease and infection in growing cities, whereas textile factories (the main employers of children) were often kept clean and dry because these conditions were necessary for the production of a marketable product. Some scholars even claim that children went to work at an early age in order to escape the poor conditions of their homes and neighborhoods.

Another major debate on child labor involves the issue of education. Some critics have claimed that children's participation in the labour market limited the development of their skills and abilities, handicapping them later in life. However, this view reflects a contemporary context which sees public education not as a privilege, but as a right. During the Industrial Revolution, many families did not have access to education and did not have the resources they needed to send children to school. Additionally, some factories offered basic education: "in England a few mills and factories established their own schools teaching reading, writing and basic arithmetic" giving children the chance to acquire education they could not otherwise afford (Marjatta, p145). In many cases, child labourers received a basic education before they began apprenticeships for higher skilled work, particularly in the watch making or handicraft industries. Although many of these children were not university bound, they were given the opportunity to gain a basic education and learn trade skills that would be valuable in future.

In regards to human rights, child labour during the Industrial Revolution has been accused of forcing children into environments which exploited them and limited their self expression and development. In addition to the arguments which have been made to dispute these claims, there is evidence that entering the labour force increased the public visibility and rights of girls and women. Before the Industrial Revolution, the father was the

breadwinner, and even during early industrialization, “the mainstay of family income was the father’s earning, 60 to 95%” (Horrell,S & Humphries,J, p491). This economic dynamic supported domestic patriarchy and left women and children with no rights. When factory work allowed children to contribute to the family, they were able to gain more financial independence and some degree of agency in the family. This was especially important for the girls because of the traditional view that girls were born to do domestic work, marry, and have children; prior to the Industrial Revolution, “any opportunity for apprenticeship or schooling went to male offspring” (Marjatta, p59). In contrast, during the Industrial Revolution, the stereotypes of female passivity influenced employers to perceive girls as ideal employees, and large factories (especially textiles and lace-making) preferred girl labourers because they were considered deft and obedient. Some of these girls received basic educations or special skill training in the factory which they would not receive at home. The education of girls was considered a wasteful investment because they were expected to marry and the work they did in or outside the home would contribute to another family. Therefore, even though girls earned lower wages than boys did, the opportunity to work outside the home was still a significantly progressive condition for them. Moreover, as employers in the traditional labour market valued strength, men and boys received the greater quantity and quality of food at the dining table. With both genders participating in the work force, women and girls were able to claim a greater share of the family meal, thereby growing stronger and healthier. Lastly, girls in the workforce were able to pay for their own consumption and contribute to their families, which postponed their marrying age.

The modern perception of child labour and human rights during the Industrial Revolution is often quick to frame the situation as exploitative and critique the use of child labour as cruel and inhumane. However, considering the economic and social conditions of the time reveals that children’s participation in the workforce was fundamental to the

development of a successful new economy. Children who worked were able to help their families afford a higher quality of life. These children also benefited from increased medical attention and the opportunity to receive a basic education or learn new skills. Moreover, the lives of girls improved because their ability to earn wages allowed them to postpone marriage and learn skills which would allow them a greater degree of independence. The aim of this paper is not to in any way advocate the use of child labour today, but rather to acknowledge the benefits of child labour to families and the economy during the Industrial Revolution.