

Industrialisation politicised the working class



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It appears agriculture lost the Investors attention, despite the fact that “ from 1760 to 1834 nearly seven million acres of waste land were reclaimed”. This waste land was exploited primarily for industrial purposes. Some historians argue that industrialization and its consequences politicized the working class. Politicized means becoming politically active, and having a proper political agenda. This essay will discuss how true the theory is, with first wave Industrialism In Britain up until 1850 being the focus.

By 1800 Britain was experiencing mass economic growth, In turn creating enough income to sustain that growth.

Industrial growth was concentrated in coal-rich areas such as the North-East, Midlands, Lancashire, the West Riding, and South Wales. Symbiotic with industrialization was urbanization. Thousands migrated to these areas, hoping for regular work with regular wages. This shift towards industry had many varied consequences.

Consequences here mean the results of Industrialization.

The government at this time reaped rewards from the Industriousness classes, but took little responsibility for the welfare of those people, “ central government still assumed few responsibilities beyond the defense of the realm”. Political restrictions on working and middle classes meant that neither group had political representation, and therefore had no means of voicing concerns. This hierarchy was considered outdated by democrat Thomas Paine, whose book *The Rights of Man*, was published In 1791-2, outlying Ideas for universal (male) rights, which should not be denied because of birth, wealth, or tradition.

Paine brought to light some radical ideas for reform, and aspired to address poverty through the redistribution of wealth. The popular book was widely discussed at British political meetings during the time of the French revolution.

These ideological views spread easily and quickly, creating within the British government a fear of revolution, and higher ideals within the people. Some of Paine's ideas came to fruition, though this happened slowly, requiring that, " Britons entrusted the state with more responsibilities .. But the historiography now stresses that they did so haltingly and grudgingly". Trust was possibly begrudged because the industrial employer was not dependent on the worker, but the worker was very dependent on the employer.

These parties had existed with mutual dependency. Landowners had previously taken responsibility for laborers, ensuring food and fuel enough for survival. The new political economy meant that wage earners were now responsible for personal and family welfare, and could no longer rely upon employers for handouts during difficulties.

The Combination Acts passed in 1799-1800 made the formation of trade unions illegal, along with groupings of men for attaining wage increases or limiting working hours, and also outlawed attempts to instigate strikes.

It therefore became ever more important to the working class to gain parliamentary representation, ensuring self-protection. As Thomas Spence said: " Are not our legislators all landlords? " He continued by stating, " It is childish to expect ever to see small farms again, or ever to see anything else than the utmost screwing and grinding of the poor, till you quite overturn

this system of landed property. Much urban and industrial property was also owned by aristocrats. Factory owners could not be held responsible for the huge numbers of employees, and the primary concern was profit, not people. Laissez-fairer allowed Britons social mobility, but meant those without means to exploit such opportunities, became the exploited.

Employers needed to remain competitive and exploit the market to survive. This was done by exploiting the workers. Life was extremely tough for the first generations of workers, and the conditions considerably angered the people affected, and some others who were not.

According to some, the terrible living and working conditions, along with the 'disposable' quality of the factory hands mimicked slavery, which was abolished in England in 1807.

Poet Robert Soother expressed the opinion that, "The slave trade is mercy compared to the factory system". However, with no representation and no sights to protest, nothing could legally be done to change conditions.

Factory-owners who needed to remain competitive.

Mechanization meant that machines did the work of many men, so Jobs were comparatively few, and according to Eric Evans, "most southern and eastern agricultural laborers did extremely badly between 1780 and 1850",

highlighting an era of great struggle for a large majority of the working class.

Men formed illegal groups secretly, feeling the conditions left little choice but to do so if conditions were ever going to change. One such group were the

Ululated, ho formed in 1811, swearing oaths of allegiance and breaking into factories, destroying expensive knitting-frames, or burning down mills.

This was organized violent protest in response to the perceived loss of the livelihoods: “ Of these three groups, the croppers or Sherman were skilled and privileged workers, among the aristocracy of the woolen workers; while the weavers and framework-knitters were outworkers, with long artisan traditions, undergoing a deterioration in status. The croppers ..

. Were in direct conflict with machinery which both they and their employers knew perfectly well would displace them”. Passing the Frame-Breaking Act, 1812, the government sided with the increasingly powerful bourgeoisie.

More acts of vandalism against factories and owners followed, were not achieved, in some ways the group was successful. Considerably few arrests were made, because these men were protected by local communities. It could be argued that this was the start of class consciousness.

The working class had common grievances, and pulled together for mutual benefit. During the next decade, speakers such as Henry Hunt rallied for reform. The ‘ Petrol massacre’ in 1819, instigated 11 deaths and 400 injuries.

This rally had the opposite effect to that intended, because the Six Acts were introduced as a result, with the aim of specifically suppressing radicalism.

William IV was crowned in 1830, and felt some measure of reform was necessary to prevent revolution.

The king anticipated that reform would be best if controlled by parliament rather than if enforced by revolt. While the monarchy took this conscious

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decision to keep control, the factory hands lost power in the role of slave to the machine: “ The workers of to-day are like a number of mechanical figures set in motion by, ND revolving round a huge steam-engine.

One does not wonder that in the early days, when iron was first brought into competition with flesh and blood, the workers rose in wrath and tried to destroy all the new machinery’. Mechanization and utilization of steam meant that machines now did the work previously undertaken by many: “ Since James Watt, in 1764, discovered how to utilities the power of steam, men have decreased in marketable price, while machinery has increased in value. To-day men are of less consequence than machines: they are the servants of machines.

The aching, in its wonderful development, has become almost human; while man has been reduced, as far as possible, to the condition of a machine. The modern worker is at the mercy of machinery. It is his pitiless master; it robs him of his wages; it pushes his fellows out of employment; it regulates his hours of toil, his food-time, his play-time”. The constant threat of destitution had detrimental effects upon the character, and it appeared to some that the workers were changed by it. Owen observed in 181 5, ‘ The general diffusion of manufactures throughout a country generates a new heartache in it’s inhabitants.

Angels echoes these sentiments”. Factory hands were robbed of individuality, “ converted into members of the industrial proletariat; not men, women, and children, each with the precious uniqueness ... But mere units in

a mass". The desire for representation was an obvious way to reclaim identity, the lack of which played a part in the politicians.

Lack of control in everyday life could also be considered a contributing factor.

Men had lost the identity linked to professional pride, or to status, or indeed linked to anything else other than the unrepresented factory life thrust upon the working class by society. Mass unemployment became characteristic in industrial towns, and many men had been skilled artisans, previously earning a good living. Some were reduced to starvation, as described by William Gobbet: " It is truly lamentable to behold so many thousands of men who formerly earned 20 to 30 shillings per week, now compelled to live on 5, 4, or even less". The Great Reform Act gave working men a voice.

This was confined to those with property worth a minimum EIA, therefore only applied to the middle class.

The act was nicknamed The Great Whig Betrayal. Working class men felt betrayed because after years of protest there was still no voice for the majority of workers. This split the alliance of the industrious classes, grouping the middle class more closely with the aristocracy for the first time. Class divisions highlighted the unfairness of being unrepresented, and reinforced the powerlessness of the working class. In 1833, the new Factory Act was passed.

This was a breakthrough prohibiting work for children under 9, providing some schooling, and also limiting the times of work for children. The major

difference between this act and its 1819 predecessor was that inspectors were appointed to implement laws. In reality, too few inspectors meant that the Act was widely ignored, but it nonetheless was progress in workplace legislation. Also, some families were so poor that all children needed to work for survival, and so evasion was common.

In 1834, the new Poor Law effectively made it ‘criminal’ to be poor.

Difficulties meant little social mobility for the majority, so the working class were largely slaves to the machine and poor, or unemployed and degraded because society deemed the able-bodied ‘undeserving’ of relief. Aspirations for reform followed on with the Chartist movement from 1836, formed from London Working Men’s Association. The 1839-42 depression coincided with a formal Chartist petition: “Chartist also raised issues of class consciousness ..

. The presentation of the 1842 petition when the movement became strongly working class in nature”.

The People’s Charter from which the movement took its name, failed, along with two further petitions. The last in 1848 marked the end of the Chartist movement. Like the Ululated, Chartists failed, but are somewhat considered “the most remediable working class movement in British history”, suggesting that Chartist made an impact.

The quote also suggests that the working class were politicized by mid nineteenth- century. However, the working class did not get the vote until 1867. Some would argue that unless a man has a right to vote, he cannot truly be politicized.

While it is to some extent true that industrialization, and the conditions it created helped to politicise the working class, it could be argued that the politicians of the working class was caused by the class divisions that aided industrialization through the provision of cheap working labor.

The fact that the livelihoods of so many men were taken away by men with more capital goes against the idea of the free economy that was promised at the time, making the government seem highly hypocritical and one-sided.

Had the working class means to voice protest against conditions from the outset, it is unlikely that industry would have been quite so economically lucrative. The working class sacrifices that were made, paved the way to success for the middle class. The middle class, it could be argued, exploited this position, creating tension enough to exacerbate the desire for change in the working class, whilst gaining Middle class representation marks a significant change in the governing of Britain.

This was a significant step towards the vote for the working class, despite the strongly felt 'betrayal' at the time. Certainly, class conflict seemed to play a part in firing up tensions at the time. What remains to be clarified though, is whether or not the working class was politicized from the top-down by external pressures changing the outlook of the people, or whether the mentality and class consciousness was already there, and was only activated by such terrible conditions into politicians.