

Cheating Nature

by George Tiller

The industrial revolution was, through its entire course, beneficial to the English people. This is true for a number of reasons, the chief one being that the industrial revolution allowed the English to cheat nature by ignoring the limits placed upon every previous society.

The most dreadful limit placed on any society is that imposed by the supply of food. "Nature has scattered the law of nature, restrains them within the proscribed bounds."¹ The English, by achieving the ability to manufacture goods cheaper and better than anyone else, were able to trade for resources on a global scale. This made the "proscribed bounds" more than large enough to accommodate a growing English population.

And grow it did. For a people supposedly dropping like flies from the effects of factory and gin-mill, the English were reproducing at a rate that makes one wonder about English reserve. How badly off were they? "During this season of distress the discouragements to marriage and difficulty of raising a family are so great that progress of population is retarded."² In 1760 the population was 6.5 million. By 1811 it grew to 10 million and reached 26 million by 1881. This is the bottom line. If the industrial revolution was not beneficial, the English population would not have grown as much as it did. Segments of the population did suffer terribly; but taken as a whole, the English thrived.

The most effective counter-argument against this is that made by Dr. James Kay. "Instructed in the fatal secret of subsisting on what is barely necessary to life, the laboring classes have ceased to entertain a laudable pride..."³ It also implies that the English were able to survive only by degrading their quality of life. This argument probably assumes that English laborers had a quality of life higher than actually possessed.

The fact that before the industrial revolution nobody knew or cared about the actual condition

¹Thomas Malthus, "An Essay on the Principle of Population," in Walter L. Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688: Sources and Problems in British History* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1981), 157.

²*Ibid.*, 159.

³James Kay, "The Moral and Physical Conditions of the Working Classes...in Manchester," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 168.

of the laboring classes is indicative of the other great benefit of the industrial revolution. Malthus writes that only the affairs of the great are found in history. The suffering was anything but inevitable. For the first time, people such as the Luddites and the Yorkshire cloth workers had a cause of their misery that was a human invention. The fact that prosperity was dependent on human decisions made poverty itself a political issue. Engels in his description of the working class of England, represents a milestone in human perception. This is because he ascribes poverty to "Industrialists who grow rich on the misery of the mass of the wage earners."⁴ Poverty, considered the fate of the majority of mankind by natural law at the beginning of the industrial revolution, was becoming a matter of political and business decisions by 1844. This implies a hope that mankind had never had before. The recognition of the "workers" as a vital part of society and the resulting concern on their behalf began to occur with the onset of the industrial revolution.

A great deal is said about the misery caused by the industrial revolution. However, given the choices (where they existed), the alternative evil would have been worse. "The immediate effects of this manufacturing phenomenon were a rapid increase of the wealth, industry, population and political influence of the British and...enabled to contend with...the most formidable military and immoral power...."⁵ Owen later laments the greed of the manufacture and the abuse of the worker. Were country squires and workshop masters any less grasping? The fact that tenant farmers were pouring into Manchester before and after 1832 from an even worse situation in Ireland suggests that greed was not confined to factory owners.⁶ Andrew Ure points to the far greater labor required by artisans and workers in domestic industries for less reward, although his description of factory children as "lively elves" strains his credibility.⁷ The Saddler Report contains vivid descriptions of the abuses in certain factories but does not deal with the problems of workers in differing modes of employment. This and the lack of hard statistical data makes the report useless in considering the alternatives facing the English worker.

The demands of the Luddites and the Yorkshire cloth workers, if followed, would not have made their lives better. For them to compete for the markets they needed, they would have caused far

⁴Friedrich Engels, "The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 177.

⁵Robert Owen, "Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 163.

⁶Kay, "Physical Conditions," 168.

⁷Andrew Ure, "The Philosophy of Manufactures," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 172-3.

greater degradation, captured fewer markets and created less wealth.⁸ As to their concern for employment, the factories created far more opportunity than they destroyed. This is confirmed by John Aikin,⁹ Owen, Kay and Ure. Ireland showed the terrible cost of restricting human enterprise.

It is interesting to note that two of the opponents to the factory system believe that most of the ills of the workers were brought upon their own "improvidence."¹⁰ It is also interesting and sad to note that not only did the parents of the factory children not riot over their treatment by the owners but that the children were sent to work by their own parents!¹¹ Is this development new or was it a holdover from the small workshop and farm? If the latter is the case, then perhaps the industrial revolution made these children's lives better.

The industrial revolution was beneficial to the English people because it gave them options that they had never had before. Goods became cheaper and far more plentiful. The mind became prized for its inventions which broke all restraints on human endeavor. For the first time, poverty itself was seen as something that could be ended; this hope alone made the industrial revolution beneficial to the English people.

⁸Leeds Woolen Merchants, "In Defense of Machinery," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 167-8.

⁹John Aikin, "A Description of...Manchester," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 162-3..

¹⁰Kay, "Physical Conditions"; Owen, "Effect," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 168-72, 163-5, passim.

¹¹Owen, "Effect," in Arnstein, *The Past Speaks Since 1688*, 164.