Did English Workers Have A Higher Standard Of Living Then Their French Counterparts Or Vice Versa? Essay, Research Paper

Did English workers have a higher standard of living then their French counterparts or vice versa? What was the impact of the French

revolution and the British industrial revolution on living standards in the two

countries?The measurement of standards of living is a contentious

subject in the fields of both economic history and economic development.? Real wages are the most common measure of

standards of living, and the relative ease of their calculation makes their use

valuable.? However real wages do not

tell the full story.? Other

environmental and social factors heavily influence standards of living.? Factors such as access to clean air, clean

water and political representation are but a selection of a plethora of other

indicators.? These variables are often

difficult to quantify empirically and much of the evidence for these factors is

qualitative in nature.? Different people

place different values on non-monetary factors.? Williamson regards clean air as a luxury item, whereas others

would regards it as a necessity or even a right.? The subjective nature of such standard of life measures fits

uneasily with more precise quantitative real wage measures.? I hope to examine both real wage and non

monetary evidence whilst answering this question, before examining the effects

of two very differing revolutions on the relative standards of living in

Britain and France.If real wages are taken to be an accurate measure of

standards of living then almost all historians would agree that British workers

enjoyed a higher standard of living than their French counterparts.? Even O?Brien and Keyder admit that in some

periods of the 19th century French real wages were 45% below those

in Britain.? These figures corroborate

evidence from contemporary observers, such as Arthur Young, which suggested

French real wages were lower than British ones.? O?Brien and Keyder argue that real wages tell us very little

about welfare standards, especially when used for comparative purposes.? They suggest that real wage estimates are bias

in favour of England?s more heavily salaried and waged population.? In 1860 87% of Britain?s workf0orce were

salaried or waged, but in 1906 only 46% of the French labour force was waged or

salaried. The persistence of peasant, family run farms in France was the

primary reason for this much smaller percentage. Real wage levels tell us of

the standards of living of only a minority of the French population.? Demographic structure also distorts these

figures.? The slow rate of population

growth in France lessened the dependency ratio.? The real wage in England had to support more people than the real

wage in France.? Real wages are also a

poor indicator of average earnings.? The

proletarianisation of the workforce in Britain meant that urban workers

suffered more heavily from unemployment and a higher incidence of casual

labour.? In other words not everyone

received the real wage all of the time.?

Again, the persistence of a more peasant based agriculture ensured that

less workers were unemployed or casually employed. The slower separation of the

means of production in France whereby the peasants maintained control over land

and capital meant that wages were but one source of income.? Peasants in France accrued income from their

capital and land.? English workers were

largely landless and accrued income almost entirely from wages.? One cannot dispute that British real wages

were consistently and appreciably above those in France, but as we have seen

real wages, especially in France, are a poor indicator of both average earnings

and standards of living.? This finding

is further strengthened upon examination of contemporary accounts.? Birbeck talks of the: ?Superior condition of

the (French) working class? whilst Colman talks of the French as: ?more civil,

cleanly, industrious frugal, sober, or better dressed people?.? Indeed Colman contrasts his positive view of

the French workers with a more negative view of English agricultural workers:

?The very poor condition of a large portion of the English agricultural labouring

population must be acknowledged?.? These

contemporary accounts help us to conclude that real wage data is often

uninformative and indeed often misleading as an indicator of standards of

living.We see in the work of O?Brien and Keyder a revision of the

assessment of French living standards.?

French living standards were not dramatically lower than those of

Britain.? Crafts suggests that contrary

to the traditional belief (Kemp, Kindleberger etc) peasant farming was not a

restraint on the living standards of the French workers.? Traditionally the slower and later

industrialisation of France has been seen as a primary reason for significantly

lower standards of living in France.?

Crafts model shows that the fertility restraint in France in the 18th

and 19th century was enough to mitigate the adverse implications on

standards of living of slow structural change.?

Crafts modelled a situation whereby Britain retained a peasant system of

farming at the expense of industrial expansion and found that the utility of

the British workers would have increased at the expense of the utility of the

capitalists.? However this conclusion

was drawn with the strong assumption that Britain would have experienced a

population stabilisation via fertility restraint.? This switch from capitalist to peasant farming would have reduced

agricultural productivity, real GNP and the level of the capital stock.? Crafts therefore backs O?Brien in suggestion

French industrialisation as seriously retarded by the agrarian structure, but

also suggests, again like O?Brien, that this structure aided the utility of the

peasants.? A more rapid

industrialisation in France would have been more painful for the majority of

the French population.? It must be

stressed that the demographic implications of large peasant agricultural sector

are vital in explaining this model.? We can use O?Brien?s and Crafts findings to help analyse the

effect of the French Revolution on living standards.? The French Revolution strengthened the position of French farming

in a number of ways.? Peasant property

rights were fortified and a large portion of biens nationaux were sold to

peasants at low prices.? Indeed in the

new Department Nord the share of the land held by the peasantry increased from

3 to 42% after the revolution.? The

inflation that accompanied the revolution allowed peasants to invest more

heavily in land and capital as previous debts were heavily devalued via newly

depreciated money.? The strengthening of

the peasants? position helped to maintain the peasant hold on agriculture,

which according to Crafts and O?Brien not only retarded industrialisation, but

allowed for a higher standard of living than a more rapid structural

transformation.? The standard of living

gains from increased income for increased landholdings and the removal of debt

burden can be seen as more static income accruing gains.The optimistic view of the effects on standard of living of

the industrial revolution is that industrialisation increased real wage gains

and welfare.? Williamson?s and Lindert?s

measure of real wages sees a near doubling of real wages between 1820 and

1850.? They conclude that average

workers were much better off from the 1830s onwards than at any time before

1820.? However the start of the

Industrial Revolution is traditionally positioned in the mid to late 18th

century.? Williamson explains this

apparent paradox by suggesting the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars

hindered capital accumulation and growth to the extent that real wages remained

relatively constant.? Williamson and

Lindert defend these impressive gains by maintaining that these increases were

not at the expense of a decline in real wages for women and children and by

stating that no conceivable level of unemployment could have cancelled out the real

wage improvements.? The co-authors also

provide an answer to the question of the effect of more qualitative urban

disamenities.? They see a premium being

added to industrial wages to compensate for the problems of urban squalor.? Statistically they rate the value put on

these human costs as ?not large enough to cancel even a tenth of blue collar

worker?s real wage?.? Williamson also

warns historians not to assess 19th century living conditions by 21st

century standards.? We gain an insight

into the level of importance that Williamson places on the so-called urban

disamenities when he states that: ?clean air, water and uncongested space are

luxury goods?.Feinstein?s own real wage figures paint a much more

pessimistic view of the effects of the industrial revolution on standards of

living.? Feinstein?s cost of living

index differs from Williamson?s in that it fails to highlight a post 1820

decline in prices.? The inclusion of a

more realistic rent measure, a more appropriate textile factor and a more representative

food bundle all serve to increase the cost of living index after 1820.? This leads to a reduction in the real wage

increases proposed by Williamson.?

Indeed Feinstein believes that it was only after 1850 that British

workers enjoyed substantial and sustained advances in real wages.? Feinstein calculates that between 1778/82

and 1853/57 the increase in average weekly earnings was barely 30%.? This relatively meagre increase is combined

with a dependency ratio increase and the 1834 decline in poor law provisions to

reduce the improvement to a mere 10-15%.?

Feinstein places more emphasis on qualitative factors.? He cites Huck, who saw an increase in infant

mortality from 1813-46, and Wrigley and Schofield, who ?suggest the possibility

of a substantial worsening of mortality in infancy and childhood in the early

19th century?, as studies consistent with a significant

deterioration in the standard of living of the urban industrial working

population.? Feinstein?s view is that

the majority of workers enjoyed a century of hard labour with little or no

advance from an already low standard of living before they began to experience

the true benefits of the economic transformation that they had helped to

create.? Allen sheds a different light

on the standard of living question by suggesting that the difference in real

wages seen between northwestern Europe (including Britain) and continental

Europe were a result of economic developments in the 17th and not

the 18th century.? He sees

the minor increase in real wages of the early 19th century as a

minor cycle within a bigger trend.? The

industrial revolution did not substantially increase real wages, but Britain?s

position as the most productive manufacturer in the world allowed her to

maintain her relatively high real wages.?

The industrial revolution allowed the maintenance of an existing level

of standards of living, and it was not until the 1870s that real gains in

living standards were achieved for the workers.Using real wages alone we can safely say that Britain?s

workers were better off than their French counterparts for the majority of the

19th century.? However, as

contemporary accounts show real wages are but one part of a proper standard of

living analysis.? The maintenance of a

peasant farming system lessens the value of real wages as a measure of

standards of living in France.? It is

also improper to suggest that British style industrialisation would have raised

French living standards.? Both Crafts

and O?Brien show that the maintenance of a peasant farming system, whilst

retarding industrialisation, allowed for a greater standard of living for the

peasantry.? Yes, the standard of living

may well have been lower in France than in Britain, but the standard could have

been significantly lower if France had adopted the British path to

industrialisation.? Comparing the living

standards of the two countries is perhaps less valuable than analysing the

possible effects of the adoption of differing paths of economic development.? The welfare effects of the industrial

revolution in Britain are less clear-cut than they once were.? The real wage statistics have been

pertinently revised and show a downgrading of improvement, whilst Williamson?s

rather right-wing dismissal of urban disamenities is inappropriate.? Urban conditions were poor and Feinstein

successfully argues for deterioration in mortality rates and general

health.? It would be harsh to suggest

that the industrial revolution lessened standards of living, but overly

optimistic to say that they were greatly improved in the short to medium term.