Industrial Revolution In England Essay, Research Paper

Labour, leisure and economic thought before the nineteenth century.

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I

When manual labour was overwhelmingly the most important factor in the generation of wealth, the labourers, artisans, servants and peasants who performed it were recognized as `the most valuable treasure of a country’.(1) The efficient running of the economy, social stability and the maintenance of civilized life were all dependent upon the masses performing assiduously, in the words of an anonymous writer in 1763, `those drudgeries for which they were born’.(2) Or, as Thomas Wimbledon more eloquently expressed it in a sermon written in 1388, `if laboreris wer[k]en not, bothe prestis and knytis mosten bicome acremen and heerdis, and ellis they sholde for defaute of bodily sustenaunce dele’.(3) Since those who laboured were the vast bulk of the population, the diligence with which they performed their tasks and the share which they retained of the product of their work were the main determinants of the wealth and incomes of the fortunate few. But it was inconceivable that their indispensable contribution could be recompensed by other than meagre financial rewards and low social status. In the eighteenth century, just as in the fourteenth, the prevailing level of economic and social development made it the natural state of things: `To be born for no other purpose but to consume the fruits of the earth is the privilege … of very few. The greater part of mankind must sweat hard to produce them, or society will no longer answer the purposes for which it was ordained’.(4)

The greater part of mankind, however, will not be prepared to sweat hard to produce the fruits of the earth for a minority to consume unless either coerced or enticed into doing so. This simple truth was recognized in all ages, and the dilemma faced by the privileged few was how to devise and operate effective means of ensuring that the poor did labour assiduously. Accordingly, such cardinal concerns were reflected not only in the laws of each era, but in a succession of social theories, ideologies and philosophies, from the three estates of the Middle Ages to the highly selective doctrine of national interest in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which stressed the benefits for the whole of society that flowed from the diligent performance by all members, high and low, of the tasks which had been allotted to them, and the rewards which the faithful would enjoy in the next world if not in this. Labour was far too valuable a commodity to be left merely to the forces of supply and demand, but neither could it be isolated from them. When labour was plentiful and cheap the market exercised its own harsh discipline on those who struggled for subsistence, urging them to industry and subservience. However, when labour became scarce the very fabric of society could be threatened, not just by rising wages and costs, but by a swelling independence among the working masses, which commonly manifested itself in a refusal to engage wholeheartedly in unremitting toil.

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When times were especially harsh for the lower orders, the pressures created by adverse market forces might be cushioned by direct or indirect actions from those above. In the populous thirteenth century, for example, custom restrained the demands which landlords made of their unfree tenants and consequently their rents did not fully reflect the rising scarcity of land; and in the years of food shortage and immiseration which peppered the closing decades of the sixteenth century and opening decades of the seventeenth, poor relief was extended from the `impotent poor’ — widows and orphans, the sick and the old — to `labouring persons not able to live off their labour’.(5) Yet, when market forces turned in favour of those who worked the land and sold their labour, and against those who owned the land, controlled capital and employed labour, it became necessary to search for means to negate or circumvent them. People had been few and land abundant in early medieval Europe, but the binding of men and women to their lords and their lands endowed estates with far greater value than they would otherwise have possessed. In the aftermath of the Black Death of 1348-9, seigneurial authority was bolstered by the government and the common law in an attempt to increase the supply of labour, restrain the rise of wages, maintain rent levels and enforce the occupation of lands.(6) In the late seventeenth century when the pool of surplus labour began to shrink and real wages began to rise after more than a century of decline and stagnation, it once again became a priority to find means of blocking and reversing harmful tendencies in the labour market. But in the later eighteenth century, when recurrent food scarcity and trade depressions threatened to impoverish the working masses, voluntary idleness ceased to be viewed as the major problem and concern duly shifted from wages which were deemed to be too high to wages which were in danger of plunging too low.

During the half-millennium and more between the Middle Ages and the onset of industrialization the structure of economy and society underwent profound change, but the priorities of those who laboured and those who did not changed far less. The portfolio of ideas, attitudes and policies regarding wages, work, workers, subsistence, consumption, leisure and charity proved exceptionally durable, as did the behaviour of the labouring poor. The issues with which the respective parties had to grapple were recurrent, as were the contrasting and frequently conflicting perspectives from which they were viewed. The broad swings which occurred over the centuries in the level of real wages and the relative scarcity of labour necessitated major adjustments in the responses of employers and employees, governors and governed, rich and poor, but such adjustments occurred within parameters which altered remarkably little, and just as circumstances displayed a tendency to recur, so similar circumstances tended to call forth similar responses.

The rising tide of writings on economic matters that flowed through the course of the seventeenth century is usually held to mark a leap forward in the evolution of economic thought, and the period has been credited with both `the birth of political economy’ as a discipline and the creation of a new economic system, which Adam Smith named the `mercantile system’.(7) Discussions of the role of labour assumed ever more prominence in the burgeoning economic literature as the seventeenth century wore on, and after mid-century a distinct change of emphasis was evident in the views which were propounded. In place of concern with an excess of people, with the creation of employment, with the control of hoards of `masterless men’ and with facilitating emigration, came a desire for a higher population, for restraints to be placed on emigration and the level of wages and, above all, for the means to ensure that the poor adhered to their customary role in society and fulfilled their duty to labour diligently.(8)

The volume and coherence of the writings on these subjects, and the broad uniformity of the views which their authors expressed, has led to a belief that in the later seventeenth century a new and distinctive `mercantilist’ theory of labour was formulated, which stressed the `utility of poverty’ by holding that `the wealth of the country [was] based on the poverty of the majority of its subjects’.(9) Starting from what are commonly held to be false premises, such doctrines proceeded by a series of seemingly logical steps to advocate the manifold benefits of low wages for the nation, whereby workmen would be compelled to be industrious, the costs of production would be suppressed and the resultant cheapness of English commodities would boost both the balance of trade and levels of employment. The ideal state, in the words of Sir William Temple, consisted of a `great multitude of people crowded into small compass of land, whereby all things necessary to life become dear, and all men who have possessions are induced to parsimony; but those who have none, are forced to industry and labour, or else to want’.(10)

Such beliefs, of course, reflected the traditional values and priorities of the political and economic elites, but they were also composed of tenets which purportedly derived from the behaviour of the labouring and artisan masses themselves, namely a preference for leisure over work and income.(11) Manifestly, the views on wages, labour and work-effort propounded from the later seventeenth century amounted to much more than simple moralizing on the inherent laziness and viciousness of the lower orders.(12) Nor were they mere despairings over the existence of legions of involuntary unemployed and underemployed, the victims of the recurrent oscillations of the pre-industrial economy, in which production and employment were affected by the seasons, the weather, the state of the harvest, wars, embargoes, and so on. Nor yet were they simply commentaries on the irregular work habits and employment opportunities that produced the intense bouts of labour followed by periods of voluntary or enforced leisure that were so characteristic of the self-employed and out-worker in the early modern era. Still less, in this era of rising wages, can inadequate nutrition and the need for frequent periods of recuperation be seen as the prime cause of the increased desire for leisure which was reported.

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From the complaints of employers, the judgements of justices, petitions to the crown and parliament, and from the great mass of writings by respectable and respected political economists, as well as partisan and polemical lobbyists, there emerges a broad consensus, avowedly based upon observation rather than theory, that the higher the wages labourers and artisans received the less they worked, and that, while low wages bred industry and diligence, high wages bred laziness, disorderliness and debauchery. Thus, Thomas Manley wrote in 1669 that English workmen `work so much the fewer days by how much the more they exact in their wages’; Sir Henry Pollexfen pronounced in 1697 that `the advances of wages hath proved an inducement to idleness; for many are for being idle the oftener because they can get so much in a little time’; and Bernard Mandeville in 1714 asserted that `Every Body knows that there is a vast number of Journey-men … who, if by Four Days Labour in a Week they can maintain themselves, will hardly be persuaded to work the fifth; and that there are Thousands of labouring Men of all sorts, who will… put themselves to fifty Inconveniences… to make Holiday’.(13)

Along with the allure of leisure and linked logically with it was a belief in the prevalence among the poorer sort of a `target consumption’, which fixed their horizons close to subsistence levels, so that the amount of work which they were prepared to undertake was directly linked to the amount of money required to satisfy a basket of basic needs. The purchase of food comprised the bulk of the expenditure of the poor and, since food prices were more volatile than money wages, the inverse relationship that existed between the price of provisions and the desire for work was repeatedly stressed. Sir Josiah Child wrote in 1694: `In a cheap year they will not work above two days in a week; their humour being such that they will not provide for a hard time; but just work so much and no more, as may maintain them in that mean condition to which they have been accustomed’,(14) It seemed self-evident to those who observed the labour market that `this habit of idleness and sloth [was] contracted by plenty’.(15) Indeed, so powerful and ubiquitous were the limited material horizons and love of leisure deemed to be that the proposition could be reversed to read: `the poor do not labour upon average above four days in a week unless provisions happen to be very dear’. The analysis was taken a stage further by Sir William Petty when he claimed that `it is observed by… [those] who employ great numbers of poor people, that when Corn is extremely plentiful, that the Labour of the poor is proportionately dear: And scarce to be had at all’.(16)

Nor did the `evils’ which were believed to flow from rising real incomes stop here. With money in their pockets and leisure at their disposal, we are told that the poor were able to engage in immoral or disruptive consumption and pastimes, and in lengthy and frequent sojourns in the alehouse, which in addition to drunkenness and debauchery were likely to promote conspiracy and sedition. Moreover, excess income was liable to be spent on imports which harmed the balance of trade, on the purchase of unsuitable items of dress and little `luxuries’ which fed `a perpetual restless ambition in each of the inferior ranks to raise themselves to the level of those immediately above them’,(17) and on injurious practices, such as tea-drinking, which was wasteful of time and destructive of industry. By these means, it was argued, high wages not only fed through to higher costs and prices, and therefore to lost production and markets, but they also made the work-force insolent, undermined social order and encouraged sedition towards the state and dishonour towards God. With the prevalence of such reasoning and anxieties it is not difficult to appreciate why the sentiments of Josiah Tucker, who held that when `the price of labour is continually beat down … [it is] greatly for the public good’, should have found such widespread instinctive support from those who did not labour for their living.(18)

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III

The fact that contemporary opinion in the later seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth was virtually unanimous in purporting to observe a strong relationship between increasing reward and decreasing effort does not of itself prove, however, that such a relationship existed in practice. Eli Heckscher was convinced that it did not, and he argued in his monumental study of Mercantilism, first published in 1931, that higher wages were bound to produce greater willingness to work or greater skills since `the wage level was not an effect, but a cause of the size of the labour supply’. He found it `strange … [that] the mercantilists sought the connection… in precisely the contrary direction’. For Heckscher, the errors of mercantilists stemmed in part from striving to invent a justification for `keeping down the mass of the people by poverty in order to make them better beasts of burden for the few’, and in part from a failure to construct their system out of knowledge of the contemporary economic situation.(19) By so doing he roundly contradicted the pioneering work of Edgar Furniss, published twenty-six years earlier. After examining the evidence of the almost universal conviction that good times decreased the industry of the labourer, Furniss had concluded that `so many and so positive are the statements of this effect of high wages that we are compelled to admit their truth and conclude that the labour supply of England at this time did not increase but decreased as wages rose’.(20)

Almost inevitably, the views of subsequent historians have tended to fall somewhere between these two extremes, but by a large majority they have veered far more towards Heckscher than towards Furniss. Despite a long and voluminous pedigree, which encompasses distant periods of history as well as developing economies in recent times, the failure of workers enduring relatively low standards of living to respond wholeheartedly to the stimulus of increased earnings is a subject which has usually been approached with considerable timidity.(21) It is not difficult to see why: the doctrine of `the utility of poverty’ is singularly unattractive from the perspective of modern academic scholarship; equally remote are the motivations and behavioural patterns of the preindustrial poor who seemingly declined opportunities to improve their wretched lot. The undoubted bias of early modern commentators, deriving from the class, occupations and regions in which they operated, has repeatedly been stressed. Most of them had a vested interest in the maintenance of low wages and compliant work-forces, and very many were employers or merchants whose personal fortunes were inextricably linked with the policies which they propounded; and since they sought to influence opinion in favour of self-interested outcomes, rhetoric repeatedly ran ahead of factual reporting and objective analysis. Few historians, therefore, have chosen to follow Elizabeth Gilboy in seeing the ascription of a preference for leisure among the lower orders as an `idea … commonly enough expressed to make one feel that it was not merely due to prejudice’, or her instinct that, `Behind this exaggerated picture there must have been some modicum of truth’.(22) On the contrary, recently Jan de Vries, who would see an `industrious revolution’ commencing in the sixteenth century, has gone so far as to dismiss the `vast body of contemporary commentary’ as a `trope justifying the subordination of the “dependent classes”‘(23)

Yet, while it would be naive to accept in full the implications of the main body of contemporary observations, it would be equally naive to dismiss them in their entirety simply because they emanated from the upper social strata.(24) It has been noted above that it is possible to untangle a stronger thread of consistent and coherent analysis from among the welter of prejudice and moralizing than is usually admitted, and what could be more natural than that the preoccupations of the practitioners, lobbyists and even the theorists of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would focus on the major problems which they observed in the world in which they lived? They routinely professed themselves to be close observers of the contemporary scene and they were concerned far less with pure theory than with what was happening, or might soon be caused to happen, in the world around them. The raw material which they attempted to fashion was the world as they observed it, and the objectives they commonly sought were essentially those which they conceived might be achieved in the short- or medium-term. Scarcely any economic thinker before the later eighteenth century had a preponderantly utopian agenda and in scarcely any field of political economy was cause and effect more directly displayed, or the evidence seemingly more concrete, than in the responses of workmen to the rate of their wages and the prices of their subsistence.

The belief of contemporaries that the real incomes of labouring and artisan households were rising from the mid-seventeenth century finds ample support from a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources. Inevitably, the most robust data, if not the most representative, are the day wage-rates of adult male building workers. Using the research of Gilboy, William Beveridge, and Henry Phelps Brown and Sheila Hopkins, Donald Coleman concluded some twenty years ago that the money paid each day to building workers rose by some 45-50 per cent between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries.(25) These venerable data have a distinct southern bias, but Donald Woodward has recently published additional series which show building wage-rates in many northern towns rising over the same period by broadly comparable proportions.(26) Data on the pay of agricultural labourers are frustratingly sparse and fail to encompass the fringe benefits which farm workers so often received, but such information as we have points in a similar direction.(27) The plentifulness of basic provisions and the frequency of exceptionally ‘cheap years’, so often alluded to in contemporary sources, is confirmed by statistics assembled by historians which show that after sharp rises in the 1630s and 1640s the direction of food prices was distinctly downwards. The price of a quarter of wheat calculated in the form of a national average, for example, fell from just under 44s. in the 1640s to 37s. (-15.6 per cent) in the 1650s, and in the 1680s it was just over 30s. (-30.9 per cent). The 1690s was a high price decade, when wheat averaged almost 42s. per quarter, but in the 1730s and 1740s it cost less than 30s.(28)

Calculating the costs of providing a basic subsistence diet is a hazardous and necessarily imprecise undertaking which has given rise to a wide range of estimates. The most recent calculations, based upon the retail prices of bread, cheese, beef and oats in Hull and Lincoln, reveal a steady fall between the 1650s and the 1680s amounting to 30 per cent; the cost of a daily diet rose in the 1690s, but even so it was still more than 20 per cent below what it had been four decades earlier. The combined effect of rising wage rates and falling subsistence costs in these two northern towns between the 1630s and the 1690s reduced the number of days which building labourers and craftsmen needed to work in order to feed themselves or their families by 35-50 per cent.(20) Naturally, the scale of the improvement in real wages which is claimed elsewhere varies in accordance with the quality and origin of the data used and the methods applied to them: the southern-based Phelps Brown and Hopkins real wage index, for example, registers only a modest rise in the course of the late seventeenth century, but over the hundred years from the 1650s to the 1740s it appreciates by almost 35 per cent. Real wages in London appear to have increased relatively slowly, but Gilboy’s indices suggest that in Lancashire in the first half of the eighteenth century they rose by almost 40 per cent. Regional and occupational variations could clearly be very wide, and the use of retail rather than wholesale prices reduces the scale of improvements, but there can be little doubt that the gains were substantial in many places and significant almost everywhere.(30)

Furthermore, it is likely that concentration upon male real wage-rates severely understates the scale of the improvements which took place in the incomes of the labouring and artisan classes. The tightening of the labour market, which pushed wages higher in the face of falling subsistence costs, must have also meant that more work was available for those who sought it. Moreover, family incomes were far from being solely dependent upon the earnings of male heads of households, and from the later seventeenth century the opportunities for the gainful employment of women and children improved markedly.(31) The general increase in the demand for labour encouraged the employment of women and children in hitherto almost exclusively male occupations, but probably of even greater significance was that this was an era when `the production of new consumer goods absorbed an increasing quantity of the nation’s economic resources’ and much of the employment in these rapidly expanding sectors was part-time and based in the home, thus of direct benefit to wives, children and the elderly.

Joan Thirsk has calculated that in order to satisfy home and foreign demand for stockings in the 1690s, more than 15 per cent of labouring and pauper families could have supplemented their living by knitting. Yet knitting stockings was only one of perhaps a hundred or more by-employments available from the later seventeenth century, as the number of consumer products proliferated and their range ever widened. Much of this work was undoubtedly relatively poorly paid — in 1673 a retired Halifax collier found the 2d. a day he earned carding wool derisory, although his productivity may have been low because he lacked experience and dexterity — but even such poorly paid employment boosted a household’s income, most significantly, its disposable income.(32) Daniel Defoe claimed from observations in Norfolk and Taunton in the 1720s that a child as young as four or five `could earn its own bread’ in the local textile industries, and that a Derbyshire lead miner’s wife could earn 3d. a day washing ore, which is about the same amount that a woman might earn spinning wool on a wheel for cloth- or hose-making.(33)

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Consequently, when these rising subsidiary incomes are added to the more easily demonstrable increases in the pay of adult males, and combined with the deflation of food prices over much of this period, the emphasis placed by contemporaries upon the relative prosperity of the lower orders and their ability to support themselves by working less than full weeks would appear to be validated.

IV

The observed habits of the labouring and artisan masses, and the interpretation put upon them by contemporaries, were not unique either to England or to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.(34) Echoes are, of course, to be found around this time in a number of European countries, but it is perhaps the era of severe labour shortage in the aftermath of the Black Death of 1348-9 which provides the most telling parallels. In fact, the diagnoses proffered and the prescriptions advocated in these two widely separated periods are in many respects remarkably similar, as indeed is the language in which they were expressed. The essence of a substantial part of the edifice of observation, theory and policy on labour and wages which we characterize as `later mercantilist’ was in evidence in the later fourteenth century.

It is doubtful that Joseph Townsend, writing in 1786, had in mind William Langland’s Piers Plowman, composed more than four centuries before, when he observed of the poor that `it is only hunger which can spur and goad them on to labour’, and that the `wisest legislator will never be able to devise a more equitable, a more effectual, or in any respect a more suitable punishment, than hunger is for a disobedient servant’.(35) But Townsend’s language as well as his sentiments bear an uncanny resemblance to Langland’s lengthy discourses on the unique ability of hunger to transform idlers and beggars into willing workmen. Langland admonished the labourers of his own day, when Hunger was sleeping,(36) for their greed and indolence and their defiance of the king’s statutes: `Ac whiles hunger was her maister. there wolde none of hem chyde / Ne stryve ageines his statut, so sternliche he loked’.(37) The fact that both Langland and Townsend dwelt upon the salutary effects of a scarcity of food upon the poor of their times is no random coincidence, for the relationship between hunger and industry, and plenty and idleness, was an integral part of the writings of both periods.(38) Thomas Mun (1664), perhaps mindful of the famine of 1661, reflected that `penury and want do make a people wise and industrious’. Similarly, when real wages plunged downwards in the harvest failures of the third quarter of the eighteenth century, observers such as William Temple (1770) and Thomas Pennant (1772) were swift to remark that `idling the whole day together … never happen[s] when wheat and other necessaries are dear’ and that until `famine pinches they will not bestir themselves’.(39)

The tenor of contemporary reflections on the well-rewarded labouring classes of later fourteenth-century England is that they pursued `their own ease and greed’ and `served their masters worse from day to day’; thus, these reflections have much in common with the general opinion of the behaviour of their successors three centuries later. And if the diagnoses of the ills besetting the labour markets in the two eras had much in common, so too did the favoured remedies. Since those who would employ labour were, in the words of the Hertfordshire justices in 1687, faced with the `Licentious humours of some servants … [who] will not work but at such times and in such manner as they please’,(40) it was natural that means should be sought to compel the idle to work. Accordingly, in addition to the enforcement of the Statute of Artificers, a prominent place was accorded in the writings of the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth to schemes designed to promote the duty to labour, backed up with a variety of coercive measures, including the denial of outdoor relief to the able-bodied and incarceration for inveterate idlers.(41) The Ordinance and Statutes of Labourers enacted during and after the Black Death had likewise made it an offence punishable by imprisonment for any man or woman, `of whatsoever condition, free or servile, able-bodied and under the age of sixty years, not living by trade nor exercising a certain craft, nor having of his own whereof he shall be able to live, or land of his own, in the tilling whereof he shall be able to occupy himself, nor serving another man’, to refuse employment.(42) Moreover, this legislation sought to restore not only the wages but the prices ruling prior to the Great Pestilence, just as the main thrust of `mercantilist writings’ was to argue `that the cost of subsistence must form the norm to which the rate of wages ought to be adjusted’.(43)

The close similarities between the thought of these two periods, despite the three centuries and more which separated them, also extend far into the consequences which were believed to flow from excessively high real wages. When the grand jury of Worcestershire made a presentment in 1661 in which they found `the unreasonableness of servants’ wages a great grievance, so that the servants are grown so proud and idle that the master cannot be known from the servant, except it be because the servant wears better clothes than his master’, they were echoing, almost to the word, the sentiments voiced by the Leicester monk, Henry Knighton, who observed of the years after the Black Death, `the lesser people were so puffed up in those days … that one might scarcely distinguish one from another for the splendour of their dress and adornments: not a humble man from a great man, nor a needy from a rich, nor a servant from his master’.(44) Many commentators in the later period favoured regulating dress by law and voiced the same concerns as the architects of the sumptuary statute of 1363 about `the outrageous and excessive apparel of divers people against their estate and degree’.(45) Nor was disquiet over the ways in which the poorer sort spent their enhanced incomes restricted to better food and clothing. According to John Gower, writing in the late 1370s, `the peasant pretends to imitate the ways of the freeman’, and had developed an appetite for `luxuries’, including beds and pillows, while for Thomas Alcock, writing in 1752, the `unnecessary expence of the poor’ included smoking and chewing tobacco, taking snuff, tea-drinking, the wearing of `ribbons, ruffles, silks and other slight foreign things’, and `dram-drinking’.(46)

High real wages also enhanced the ability of the lower orders to participate in unsuitable leisure pursuits, which duly made their regulation a priority in both periods. The revival of interest in the Reformation of Manners in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may well have sprung as much from a desire to increase industriousness as from the puritanical predilection to stamp out drunkenness and other `ungodly’ pursuits, which had been the guiding motive behind its former incarnation in Elizabethan and early Stuart times. When Henry Fielding denounced the `too frequent and expensive diversions among the lower kind of people’ in 1751, he explained: `Besides the actual expense of attending these places of pleasure, [there is] the loss of time and neglect of business’. Alcock concurred, citing the simple pleasure of tea-drinking and castigating the `considerable loss of time [which] attends this silly habit … a circumstance of no small moment to those who are to live by their labour’. In the words of Edgar Furniss: `The fair, the gathering at the alehouse, were denoted as nuisances and suppressed as such, not alone, nor principally, because they bred riot and disturbance but also because they appeared most obviously to relax the industry of the labouring body’.(47) When subsistence needs had been satisfied, men and women were the more easily enticed away from labour by such entertainments. Gower was exasperated by rustics who `desire the leisures of great men’; Langland railed against those who haunted brewhouses as if they were churches; and Robert Rypon, prior of Durham and contemporary of Chaucer, condemned the amount of time which the lower orders devoted to useless and unnecessary occupations such as shooting in the butts, drinkings, chess and dice-playing, and gossiping and coarse jesting, to which other moralists added more active sports such as wrestling and football.(48)

Thus, there is abundant evidence of how labourers and artisans were thought to behave, but it is appropriate now to examine the issue from the perspective of the workers themselves, although even on the level of elementary theory this is a far from straightforward task. There is the basic problem of what constituted labour and leisure. Voluntary leisure time has to be distinguished from involuntary: work cannot be performed if there is no demand for it. What constituted labour is also problematical in a society in which many members possessed or had access to their own means of production (plots of land, basic industrial equipment and such), in which a significant proportion of production, both for self-consumption and for sale, took place within the household, and in which a significant proportion of the labour force combined household production with work for wages. By no means all of the time spent away from paid employment was

`wasted on idling’: those with smallholdings raised crops and kept poultry and animals, while the landless could glean corn and collect fuel, and produce a variety of goods to be consumed within the household or even sold. Indeed, it is possible that much so-called ‘leisure’ might have yielded a greater marginal return than time spent working for wages. Nor did a day off work necessarily mean the loss of a full day’s production. As Adam Smith was to confirm in the 1770s, the working of short weeks by the self-employed or by those paid by the piece could simply mean that they chose to cram five or six day’s production into four.(49) At the same time, the amount of work which individuals sought was conditioned by far more than personal inclination, the level of wages and the price and attractiveness of goods. It varied according to stages in the life-cycle, which for most brought rising then falling numbers of dependent mouths to feed and bodies to clothe, and increasing then diminishing reserves of energy and strength.

Most significantly, conventional economic analysis is of limited rather than decisive assistance in any evaluation of the accuracy of contemporary assertions. The backward-sloping labour-supply function, although in many respects a simple concept to accept in social terms, is much more difficult to comprehend within the laws of neo-classical economics, by which the normal expectations of rational behaviour in a market economy endow the individual worker with a strong desire to maximize income and an almost infinite variety of enticing goods upon which to spend his money. According to these parameters we are instructed that, with the exception of the very well-remunerated, as wages rise so more work will be offered by each worker, because each increase in wages makes leisure more expensive and therefore less attractive. Consequently, it is only at high rates of income, after successive increases in earnings and work-time and decreases in leisure-time have taken place, that the value placed upon leisure will eventually match and then exceed the attractions of further work and the acquisition of yet more goods.

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Thus, there is abundant evidence of how labourers and artisans were thought to behave, but it is appropriate now to examine the issue from the perspective of the workers themselves, although even on the level of elementary theory this is a far from straightforward task. There is the basic problem of what constituted labour and leisure. Voluntary leisure time has to be distinguished from involuntary: work cannot be performed if there is no demand for it. What constituted labour is also problematical in a society in which many members possessed or had access to their own means of production (plots of land, basic industrial equipment and such), in which a significant proportion of production, both for self-consumption and for sale, took place within the household, and in which a significant proportion of the labour force combined household production with work for wages. By no means all of the time spent away from paid employment was

`wasted on idling’: those with smallholdings raised crops and kept poultry and animals, while the landless could glean corn and collect fuel, and produce a variety of goods to be consumed within the household or even sold. Indeed, it is possible that much so-called ‘leisure’ might have yielded a greater marginal return than time spent working for wages. Nor did a day off work necessarily mean the loss of a full day’s production. As Adam Smith was to confirm in the 1770s, the working of short weeks by the self-employed or by those paid by the piece could simply mean that they chose to cram five or six day’s production into four.(49) At the same time, the amount of work which individuals sought was conditioned by far more than personal inclination, the level of wages and the price and attractiveness of goods. It varied according to stages in the life-cycle, which for most brought rising then falling numbers of dependent mouths to feed and bodies to clothe, and increasing then diminishing reserves of energy and strength.

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But what is reported by contemporaries as happening in the later seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth is that the labour-supply curve of the poorer members of society began to bend backwards at relatively low levels of income, and it was this preference for leisure over income among those who possessed very little which drove employers to distraction and commentators and political economists to bouts of mercantilistic moralizing. Was such behaviour irrational? How might it be explained?

As a first step, one might question whether the rationality which requires that the maximization of satisfaction be achieved primarily through income and consumption should be applied to the pre-industrial world. Work, consumption and leisure have social and cultural as well as economic dimensions. The manner in which later seventeenth and eighteenth-century men and women assessed the utility of work, leisure and consumables was in large measure derived from the practices and value systems of their working and living environments. The persistence of irregular work habits drew strength from a tradition of discontinuous working which had been nurtured over the centuries by the prevalence of self-employment and piece-rate work, by the uneven phases of the farming year, by the rites, recreations and holy days of the seasons, and by the impact of recurrent sharp vicissitudes in agricultural output, prices and business activity. Moreover, in the immediately preceding era of surplus population, continuous employment had been especially difficult to obtain and, perhaps, owing to a lack of adequate nutrition, also often difficult to sustain.

The disutility of most work was also high, since it consisted in the main of hard manual labour or unpleasant and repetitive tasks. The incentive to perform such work after basic needs had been satisfied depended largely upon what could be purchased with the additional income. But, although the consumption of non-essentials by the lower social strata undoubtedly increased as their range widened progressively in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and their prices often fell substantially in real terms, the cost of many items in terms of the labour needed to acquire them does appear to have remained sufficiently high to have dissuaded the majority of workers from engaging fully in `rampant consumerism’.(50) The lack of convenient means of saving and investing surplus income also acted as a discouragement to the maximization of earnings in good times. Indeed, there is more than a little truth in the notion that in the centuries before the industrial revolution men and women worked irregularly from necessity when times were bad and irregularly from choice when times were good.

E. P. Thompson, in a towering contribution to our understanding of the `moral economy’ of work and leisure in a `task oriented’ rather than a `time oriented’ society, judged that the `irregular labour rhythms’, which prevailed when most men were in control of their own working lives, `help us to understand the severity of mercantilist labour doctrines as to the necessity for holding down wages as a preventative against idleness’. However, these and similar sentiments have recently been categorized by de Vries as ironic examples of `historians who regard themselves as champions of the common man’ appropriating the claims put forward by elites seeking to perpetuate the poverty of the common man.(51) While it is true that Thompson was sometimes neglectful of the economic context within which labour operated, he was acutely aware of its social and cultural context, and his work demonstrates how essential it is to temper modern economic analysis and consumer theory with a good dose of contemporary mentality.(52)

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Peter Mathias has provided a crisp focus on the effects of short-term fluctuations in employment, money wages and prices on the industriousness of the work-force.(53) Such fluctuations were, of course, both commonplace and severe in later seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century England and, as Adam Smith noted, `the demand for labour increases in years of sudden and extraordinary plenty, and diminishes in those of sudden and extraordinary scarcity’.(54) `Windfall gains’, in the shape of exceptionally high but essentially short-lived earnings or substantially reduced outgoings due to bumper harvests and low food prices, were unlikely to induce workers to abandon totally their customary expectations and levels of consumption, and therefore resulted in an increase in voluntary leisure. Short-term leisure preference of this sort featured prominently in contemporary analyses, with their repeated references to the idleness induced by `cheap years’ or a `sudden rise of wages’.

This need not mean, however, that over the longer term more permanent increases in real wages necessarily led to a fall in the amount of labour offered. It is possible for individual workers to indulge in a fair measure of leisure preference and still work more when the demand for labour is high than they had been able to when employment was less easily obtainable. Furthermore, the neo-classical assumption that the labour force is a constant proportion of the total population does not hold true for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with their abundance of small-holders and self-producers who might enter or withdraw from the labour market. Thus, even if the amount of labour offered by those currently employed was reduced, higher wages might induce others to enter the labour market. As Mathias has put it: `One man’s leisure preference might prove to be another man’s employment opportunity’.(55) Nor is the persistence of a high utility accorded to leisure necessarily in conflict with an increase in the supply of labour on the market brought about by a shift in the proportions of the productive resources of households from non-marketed goods and labour to marketed goods and labour. Instead, some part of the additional income generated by wives and children in this manner might have been used to support a lower work intensity by the male heads of households. Finally, and most importantly, even a strong predilection for leisure did not mean that increases in wage rates or falls in the prices of subsistence goods were translated penny for penny into more time off work, as was sometimes suggested by contemporaries. In fact, it is much more likely that favourable movements in wage rates and prices would lead to an increase in both leisure and consumption, an outcome which helps to explain the paradox that the poor in times of high wages and plenty were accused both of refusing to work and of consuming more goods, many of which were unbefitting their social station.

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In short, a multitude of forces pushing in a variety of directions played their part in determining the working patterns of the labouring and artisan classes and the amount of voluntary leisure which they might take, and, what is more, the mix and strength of each of these changed over time, space and occupation. Such a multiplicity of cross-currents, allied to the vagaries of behaviour by individuals and groups at particular times and in particular places, was bound to ferment complexity and contradictions in the accounts of those who observed them, and to impede their ability to represent and analyse. The historian has the advantage of perspective, but also the disadvantage of distance, yet it would appear to be the case that in good times the labouring and artisan masses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries commonly refused to take all the work that was on offer.

VI

It may never prove possible to measure with any pretence of accuracy the total amount of labour supplied in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, or to monitor precisely how it changed over time. To provide a conclusive test of the veracity of contemporary commentators on the behaviour of the generality of labourers and artisans one would need abundant data on the relationship between the cost of living, earnings and the numbers of days worked across a representative range of occupations in a representative sample of regions over an adequate span of years. Sadly, such robust evidence is never likely to be available in sufficient quantities to settle the issue, for the working patterns of even full-time employees can only be gathered from continuous sets of accounts covering long time periods, which record the names of individual workmen and women, the number of days they worked and the sums they were paid; precious few such records survive. However, some progress towards establishing a balance of probabilities can be achieved, and some tangential records may well yield unexpected insights,(56)

Handled sensitively, the most informative records of coalmining operations can provide an illuminating case study, although it must be understood at the outset that colliers were not representative of the labour force as a whole. Due to the rapid expansion of the demand for coal, skilled colliers were frequently in short supply, especially in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and their scarcity manifested itself in a variety of ways in addition to enhanced wages and incentive bonuses. Moreover, the nature of the industry usually led coal owners to place great emphasis on continuous full-time working by employees, though with limited success. Thus, there frequently appears to have existed in the coal industry the conditions of which later seventeenth and early eighteenth-century writers complained in the economy at large: a combination of high wages and a reluctance to work. But to understand the true picture in coal-mining it is essential to break colliery work-forces down into their constituent parts. Some employees, such as viewers, overmen and grieves were mining engineers, surveyors, managers and clerks rather than manual labourers, while categories of manual labourers included those who looked after the horses, helped to drain the pits, maintained the wagonways and transported the coal above and below ground. The elite of the labouring colliers were the hewers, who won the coal from the face. Aside from strength and courage, hewing demanded considerable skill and experience in order to maximize the output and preserve the long-term viability and profitability of the pit; consequently, hewers were normally rewarded by rates of pay well above those received by the rest of the manual work-force of the colliery, and by those employed in agriculture in the surrounding countryside.(57)

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(3) N. H. Owen, `Thomas Wimbledon’s Sermon: “Redde Racionem Villicacionis Tue”‘, Mediaeval Studies, xxviii (1966), 179.

(4) Henry Fielding, An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers (London, 1751), 7.

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(8) Heckscher, Mercantilism, 158; Coleman, `Labour in the English Economy of the Seventeenth Century’, 305-6; Appleby, Economic Thought and Ideology, 134-5.

(9) Classic accounts, written from different perspectives, are contained in Furniss, Position of the Laborer, esp. 117-56; Heckscher, Mercantilism, esp. 157-72.

(10) Sir William Temple, Observations on the United Provinces of the Netherlands (London, 1673), 187.

(11) There is an abundant literature on attitudes to labour and wages in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in addition to that cited in nn. 1 and 7 above, of which the following is a small selection: T. E. Gregory, `The Economics of Employment in England, 1660-1713′, Economica, i (1921); Dorothy Marshall, The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Social and Administrative History (London, 1926; repr. 1969), 15-56; A. W. Coats, `Changing Attitudes to Labour in the Mid-Eighteenth Century’, Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd ser., xi (1958); also his `Economic Thought and Poor Law Policy in the Eighteenth Century’, Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd ser., xiii (1960-1); R. C. Wiles, `The Theory of Wages in Later English Mercantilism’, Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd ser., xxi (1968); P. Earl, The World of Defoe (London, 1976), 107-57.

12) For particularly perceptive and wide-ranging discussions of the existence and nature of `leisure preference’ in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, see Peter Mathias, `Leisure and Wages in Theory and Practice’, in his The Transformation of England: Essays in the Economic and Social History of England in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1979); see also his `Time for Work and Time for Play: Relations between Work and Leisure in the Early Modern Period’, Vierteljahrschrift fur Sozialund Wirtschaftsgeschichte, lxxxi (1994); E. P. Thompson, `Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’, Past and Present, no. 38 (Dec. 1967); also his `The Patricians and the Plebs’, in E. P. Thompson, Customs in Common (London, 1993).

(13) Thomas Manley, Usurie at Six Per Cent (London, 1669), 19; Henry Pollexfen, A Discourse of Trade (London, 1697), 47; Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Publick Virtues, ed. F. B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924), i, 509.

(14) Sir Josiah Child, A New Discourse of Trade (London, 1694), 15, 16.

(15) John Law, Proposals and Reasons for Constituting a Council of Trade (Edinburgh, 1701), 85.

(16) Sir William Petty, Political Arithmetic (1690), in Economic Writings of Sir William Petty, ed. Hull, i, 274. Since good harvests and cheap food tended to boost the demand for manufactures, employers would be seeking to increase their work-forces at just that time when the work effort of labourers and artisans was tending to decline, and thus a two-fold upward pressure would be exerted on wages.

(17) Nathaniel Forster, Enquiry into the Causes of the Present High Price of Provisions (London, 1767), 41. The frequency and severity of such criticisms increased over time, in keeping with improvements in real earnings and a broadening of consumption.

(18) Sir Josiah Tucker, A Brief Essay on the Advantages and Disadvantages with Regard to Trade, 2nd edn (London, 1750), 42.

(19) Heckscher, Mercantilism, 165-6.

(20) Furniss, Position of the Laborer, 118.

(21) E. J. Berg, `Backward Sloping Labor Supply Functions in Dual Economies: The African Case’, Quart. Jl Econ., lxxv (1961), provides a useful guide to the anthropological literature on `leisure preference’ as well as an illuminating analysis of the supply of casual labour in Sub-Saharan Africa. For additional examples, ranging from the Indians in upper New York State in 1749 to Mexican miners in the twentieth century, see Mathias, `Leisure and Wages in Theory and Practice’, 151-4; Thompson, `Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’, 90-4.

(22) E. W. Gilboy, Wages in Eighteenth-Century England (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 21.

(23) Jan de Vries, `Between Purchasing Power and the World of Goods: Understanding the Household Economy in Early Modern Europe’, in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), Consumption and the World of Goods (London, 1993), 12 n. 81.

(24) It is an almost impossible task to present an adequate summary of the miscellaneous views expressed in the vast outpouring of writings and speeches on these matters, even over a brief period of time. Not only was there rarely a consensus, individuals frequently changed their opinons as well as the focus of their arguments as they engaged in debate. Moreover, second-rate opinions were not necessarily less influential than first-rate, and any attempt at simplification by concentration on prescient elements in texts written by major figures is bound to obscure the abundant continuities and contradictions in both the greater and the lesser literature, and the tensions which were frequently exhibited within them between conceptions of future promise and pragmatic acknowledgments of present reality.

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