The joy of longer working hours in the Industrial Revolution [1]

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There's an interesting piece over at Bloomberg talking about those longer working hours that turned up with the Industrial Revolution. You know, the ones where the peasantry had to be whipped off the fields and into the factories so that the filthy capitalists could exploit them: [3]

> First, working-class writers put a very different spin on the increase in working hours that accompanied industrialization. The autobiographies make clear that in pre- industrial Britain, there simply wasn?t enough work to go around. As a result, few people were fully employed throughout the year. This gave them leisure time, but it also left most families eking out an uncomfortable living on the margins. The lack of consistent employment also forced workers to stay in positions that were unsuitable or grossly exploitative.

That the people suffering under such exploitation thought it was a good thing does rather change what should be our view of said exploitation. And it's also not clear precisely who had the power here:

> Higher levels of employment also helped change the balance of power between master and laborer. So long as jobs remained scarce, workers, by necessity, obeyed their employers. The price of dissent or disobedience was unemployment. With more jobs, such subservience became less and less necessary. In the booming new industrial towns, workers could, and did, walk out on employers over relatively minor matters, confident that finding more work wouldn?t be difficult.

Or, as I might put it, the only thing worse than being exploited by a capitalist factory owner is not being exploited by a capitalist factory owner.

I will admit thought that I'm always very wary of people giving us pre-industrial working hours. There's a terrible tendency to only include *paid* working hours as working hours. And of course in a rural, largely subsistence, economy paid working hours are indeed few and far between. But that doesn't mean that each day isn't full of unrelenting labour: there's still the potato patch to dig, the firewood to be collected, the pigs to run for acorns, the cow to milk and muck out and so on. Indeed, when we get back to feudal times working hours seem to be measured as only the work that was done for the feudal lord. Which is obviously nonsense: that's the work that was done to pay the rent and pay the rent only. Think it through: one source tells us that villeins had 70 days a year holiday. Seriously? An animal keeping peasant has 70 days off a year? What the heck happens to all the animals?

But back to the effect of the industrial revolution: did it actually improve the lives of those sucked into the factories or not? Was Marx correct on the immiseration or not?

One very useful number that I've seen recently (offline, so no link) is the difference between farmhand wages in the North and the South. In the 1830s, 1840s, Somerset and Dorset were almost untouched by the new industries: farmhand wages were of the order of 8 shillings a week. Up north the entire countryside was littered with cotton mills and whippet flange factories. Farmhand wages were 16 to 18 shillings a week. The farmers had to pay double the wages to stop their labour going off to exploit the capitalists in the factories.

I'm still not entirely sure that the industrial revolution did lead to longer working hours. Longer paid working hours, most certainly yes, but really not sure about the combination of paid and subsistence hours. On the other hand I am absolutely certain that the factories improved the living conditions of those who worked in them. And I don't think us moderns quite understand the misery of a subsistence peasant lifestyle: if we did we'd understand a great deal better why people flocked to those factories and mines as they did.

Of course, if any of our Marxist inclined confreres were minded to actually find out about why people did so all they've got to do is buy a ticket to China and go ask the people in the factories there. "So, why did you live a life of rural idiocy and destitution to earn five times the wages making iPads?" would seem to be a useful start to such an interrogation.

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