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Common Error No. 3 [1]

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3. "The industrial revolution brought poverty and misery for the masses."

The masses already had quite enough poverty and misery. The mediaeval myth of rosy-cheeked and carefree villagers dancing around the maypole before returning home to dine on roast beef is a later construction of romantic conservatives. The reality was squalor and unremitting toil. People worked the entire day, and lived on a poor, basic diet of which there was often not enough. Death from disease or childbirth was common, as were malnutrition and starvation. A more real impression of what life was like can be gained by looking at agricultural economies in poor countries today.

The industrial revolution created employment opportunities and gave the chance of advancement. True, women and children worked long hours. They had always done so. True, working conditions were poor and often dangerous. They had always been so. The working class housing that characterized Northern and Midlands industrial cities was an improvement on the squalid and primitive hovels which the agricultural poor inhabited.

Industrialization enabled labour to be more efficient, and to add more value to goods, enabling workers to be paid more. With the spread of mechanized production, the wage labourers were gradually able to afford better food, better clothing, better household goods such as china, and luxuries such as tea. It was the industrial revolution that made it possible for people to become richer by creating wealth and to move away from mere subsistence.

The wealth-creating process gradually made society able to afford better public health and social amenities. It enabled society to afford higher standards of safety at work. It was the wealth generated that made families rich enough to educate children instead of needing them to work.

It is only natural that we compare the conditions of early industrialization with our own, and call them "Dickensian." We should really compare them with what prevailed before then. Capitalism was a step up.

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