

## 1815-1819 THE SIX ACTS

The unrest of 1815-16 is vividly described by Samuel Bamford, a Lancashire weaver, in the opening pages of his LIFE OF A RADICAL.

It is a matter of history, that whilst the laurels were yet cool on the brows of our victorious soldiers on their second occupation of Paris, the elements of convulsion were at work amongst the masses of our labouring population; and that a series of disturbances commenced with the introduction of the Corn Bill in 1815, and continued, with short intervals, until the close of the year 1816. In London and Westminster riots ensued, and were continued for several days, whilst the Bill was discussed; at Bridport there were riots on account of the high price of bread; at Bideford, there were similar disturbances to prevent the exportation of grain; at Bury, by the unemployed, to destroy machinery; at Ely, not suppressed without bloodshed; at Newcastle-on-Tyne, by colliers and others; at Glasgow, where blood was shed, on account of the soup kitchens; at Preston, by unemployed weavers; at Nottingham, by Luddites, who destroyed 30 frames; at Merthyr Tydvil, on a reduction of wages; at Birmingham, by the unemployed; at Walsall, by the distressed; and December 7th 1816, at Dundee, where owing to the high price of meal, upwards of 100 shops were plundered.

These disorders were simultaneous reactions to economic distress. Luddism was no new thing in the Midlands.

(Life of a Radical p.6)

### THE CHALLENGE TO CAPITALISM

The left wing of socialism informs us that it is working for the emancipation of the community from the capitalist system; because under capitalism "labour is bought and sold as an article of commerce, so that the workers are degraded to a condition of poverty and wage slavery". Whether this statement be right or wrong, one thing is clear; it is possible now to come to grips with capitalism in a way that was impossible 100 or even 50 years ago. Capitalism, with its complement, the wage system, has arrived. The system which prevailed in most industries 50 to 100 years ago was what we have called, for lack of a better name, "semi-capitalism". Its great feature was its indefiniteness. Truck and deductions ate into earnings, and earnings were not true wages. They were the price of goods rather than the wages of labour. The employer in many cases did not employ. He left this to intermediaries. The manufacturer in many cases neither made things with his own hands, as the word signifies, nor did he possess and manage premises on which others made goods under his supervision. He was a merchant rather than a manufacturer. Semi-capitalism differs from full capitalism as does a zone of improvised defences in open warfare from a clearly defined trench system; and every gunner knows which is the more difficult to attack.

(Extract from the Objects of the Cambridge University Socialist Society, Lent Term 1919.)

### AGRICULTURE

The revolt of the agricultural labourers in 1830 was the revolt of a proletariat, a revolt against capitalist employers by wage earners who no longer possessed a stake in the soil. One of the letters of the mysterious Captain Swing, who made himself the terror of the countryside, ran:

We will destroy the corn stacks and the threshing machines this year, next year we will have a turn with the parsons, and the third we will make war upon the statesmen.



## THE COTTON INDUSTRY

Outside agriculture the only industry which in 1815 was fully capitalised was the spinning branch of the Lancashire cotton industry. William Fielden of Blackburn told the Emigration Committee of 1826-27 how things had been done in the old hand-spinning days. "The raw cotton was taken out by the weaver, and spun in his own house, and the change to spinning mills was productive of considerable inconvenience in the first instance, great alarm was created and some spinning mills were destroyed at the time. Many persons were thrown out of employment; but at that time the manufacture of the United Kingdom was in a very limited state compared with what it is at present".

(Commons' Committee on Emigration (1826-27) Q.1970.)

Cotton-weavers' Weekly Wages	s. d.		Price per dozen of Women's Worsted Stockings	s. d.	
1795-1804	26	8	1815	7	6
1804-1811	20	0	1825	6	6
1811-1818	14	7	1826	5	6
1818-1825	8	9	1835	4	9
1825-1832	6	4	1836	5	0
1832-1834	5	6	1841	4	6

(Report of the Commissioner on the Condition of the Frame-work Knitters (1845) p.38.)



The British Industrial Revolution was by no means only cotton, or Lancashire or even textiles, and cotton lost its primacy within it after a couple of generations. Yet cotton was the pacemaker of industrial change, and the basis of the first regions which could not have existed but for industrialization, and which expressed a new form of society, industrial capitalism, based on a new form of production, the 'factory'. Other towns were smoky and filled with steam-engines in 1830, though not to anything like the same extent as the cotton towns - in 1838 Manchester and Salford possessed almost three times as much steampower as Birmingham\* - but they were not towns dominated by factories until the second half of the century, if then. Other industrial regions possessed large-scale enterprises operated by proletarian masses, and surrounded by impressive machinery, like coal-mines and iron-works, but their often isolated or rural location, the traditional background of their labour force and its different social environment made them somehow less typical of the new era, except in their capacity to transform buildings and landscapes into an unprecedented scene of fire, slag and iron structures.

\* The respective populations of the two urban areas in 1841 were about 280 and 180 thousand.

Other industries applied some elementary mechanization and power - including steam power - to the small workshop, notably in the multitude of metal-using industries so characteristic of Sheffield and the Midlands, but without changing the character of their craft, or domestic production. Some of these complexes of small interlocking workshops were urban, as in Sheffield and Birmingham, some rural, as in the lost villages of the 'Black Country'; some of their workers were skilled, organized, almost guild-proud journeymen craftsmen (like the cutlery trades in Sheffield); others increasingly degenerated into barbarized and murderous villages of men and women hammering out nails, chains, and other simple metal goods. (In Dudley, Worcestershire, the average expectation of life at birth in 1841-50 was eighteen and a half years.) Yet others, like the pottery trades, developed something closer to a primitive factory system, or rather comparatively large-scale establishments based on an elaborate internal division of labour. On the whole, however, except for cotton, and the large-scale establishments characteristic of iron and coal, the development of production in mechanized factories, or in analogous establishments had to wait until the second half of the nineteenth century, and the average size of plant or enterprise was small. Even in 1851, 1,670 cottonmasters included a considerably greater number of establishments employing a hundred or more men than the total put together of all the 41,000 tailors, shoemakers, engine- and machine-makers, builders, wheelwrights, tanners, woollen and worsted manufacturers, silk manufacturers, millers, lace manufacturers and earthenware manufacturers who reported the size of their establishments to the Census.

The early phases of the Industrial Revolution (say 1780-1815) were, as we have seen, limited and relatively cheap. Gross capital formation may have amounted to no more than seven per cent of the national income by the early nineteenth century, which is below the rate of ten per cent which some economists have taken as essential for industrialization today, and far below the rates of up to thirty per cent which have been encountered in rapid industrializations of emerging, or the modernization of advanced, countries. Not until the 1830s and 1840s did gross capital formation in Britain pass the ten per cent threshold, and by then the age of (cheap) industrialization based on such things as textiles was giving way to the age of railways, coal, iron and steel. The second assumption that wages must be kept low was altogether wrong, but had some plausibility initially, because the wealthiest classes and greatest potential



investors in this period - the great landlords, mercantile and financial interests - did not invest to any substantial extent in the new industries. Cotton-masters and other budding industrialists were therefore left to scrape together a little initial capital and expand it by ploughing back their profits, not because there was an absolute capital shortage, but simply because they had little access to the big money. By the 1830s, once again, there was no capital shortage anywhere.

In the post-Napoleonic decades the figures of the balance of payments show us the extraordinary spectacle of the only industrial economy in the world and the only serious exporter of manufactured goods unable to maintain an export surplus in its commodity trade. After 1826, indeed, the country had a deficit not only on trade but also on its services (shipping, insurance commissions, profits on foreign trade and services, etc.) \*

\* To be more precise, this balance was slightly negative in 1826-30, positive 1831-5, and negative again in all the quinquennia from 1836 to 1855.

From the crisis of 1837 on, middle-class agitation revived under the banner of the Anti-Corn-Law League, that of the labouring masses broadened out into the giant movement for the People's Charter, though the two now ran independently of and in opposition to each other. Yet both in their rival ways were prepared for extremes, especially during that worst of nineteenth-century depressions, 1841-2: Chartism for a general strike, the middle-class extremists for a national lock-out which would, by flooding the streets with starving labourers, force the government into action. Much of this tension of the period from 1829 to 1846 was due to this combination of working classes despairing because they had not enough to eat and manufacturers despairing because they genuinely believed the prevailing political and fiscal arrangements to be slowly throttling the economy. And they had cause for alarm. In the 1830s even the crudest accountants' criterion of economic progress, real income per head (which must not be confused with the average standard of living) was actually - and for the first time since 1700 - falling. If nothing was done, would not the capitalist economy break down? And might not, as observers increasingly began to fear around 1840 all over Europe, the impoverished, disinherited masses of the labouring poor revolt? As Marx and Engels rightly pointed out, in the 1840s the spectre of communism haunted Europe. If it was relatively less feared in Britain, the spectre of economic breakdown was equally appalling to the middle class.

The British aristocracy and gentry was thus very little affected by industrialization, except for the better. Their rents swelled with the demand for farm-produce, the expansion of cities (whose soil they owned) and of mines, forges and railways (which were situated on their estates). And even when times were bad for agriculture, as between 1815 and 1830s, they were unlikely to be reduced to penury. Their social predominance remained untouched, their political power in the countryside completed, and even in the nation not seriously troubled, though from the 1830s they had to consider the susceptibilities of a powerful and militant provincial middle class of businessmen.

For instance, the fundamental institution of working-class self-defence, the trade union was already in being in the eighteenth century, partly in the unsystematic, but not ineffective, form of periodic 'collective bargaining by riot' (as among seamen, miners, weavers and framework knitters), partly in the much stabler form of craft societies for skilled journeymen, sometimes with loose national links through the practice of assisting unemployed members of the trade, travelling in search of work or experience.



An important group had even accepted, indeed welcomed, industry, science and progress (though not capitalism). These were the 'artisans' or 'Mechanics', the men of skill, expertise, independence and education, who saw no great distinction between themselves and those of similar social standing who chose to become entrepreneurs, or to remain yeoman farmers or small shopkeepers: the body of men who overlapped the frontiers between working and middle classes. The 'artisans' were the natural leaders of ideology and organization among the Labouring poor, the pioneers of Radicalism (and later the early, Owenite, Versions of Socialism), of discussion and popular higher education - through Mechanics' Institutes, Halls of Science, and a variety of clubs, societies and free-thinking printers and publishers - the nucleus of trade unions, Jacobin, Chartist or any other progressive movements. The agricultural labourers' riots were stiffened by village cobblers and builders; in the cities little groups of handloom weavers, printers, tailors, and perhaps a few small businessmen and shopkeepers provided political continuity of leadership on the left until the decline of Chartism, if not beyond. Hostile to capitalism they were unique in elaborating ideologies which did not simply seek to return to an idealized tradition, but envisaged a just society which would also be technically progressive. Above all, they represented the ideal of freedom and independence in an age when everything conspired to degrade labour.

Yet even these were only transitional solutions for the workers' problem. Industrialization multiplied the number of handloom weavers and framework-knitters until the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Thereafter it destroyed them by slow strangulation: militant and thoughtful communities like the Dunfermline linen workers broke up in demoralization, pauperization and emigration in the 1830s. Skilled craftsmen were degraded into sweated outworkers, as in the London furniture trades.

There is, of course, no dispute about the fact that relatively, the poor grew poorer, simply because the country, and its rich and middle class, so obviously grew wealthier. The very moment when the poor were at the end of their tether - in the early and middle forties - was the moment when the middle class dripped with excess capital, to be wildly invested in railways and spent on the bulging, opulent household furnishings displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and on the palatial municipal constructions which prepared to rise in the smoky northern cities.

In Britain, there was never the slightest general shortage of capital, given the country's wealth and the relative cheapness of the early industrial processes, but a large section of those who benefited from this diversion of income - and the richest among them in particular - invested their money outside direct industrial development or wasted it, thus forcing the rest of the (smaller) entrepreneurs to press even more harshly upon labour. Moreover, the economy did not rely for its development on the purchasing capacity of its working population: indeed economists tended to assume that their wages would not be much above the level of subsistence. Theories advocating high wages as economically advantageous, began to appear finally round the middle of the century, and the industries supplying the domestic consumer market - e.g. clothing and furniture - were not revolutionized until its second half. The Englishman who wanted a pair of trousers had the choice either of having them made to measure by a tailor, buying the cast-offs of his social superiors, relying on charity, going in rags, or making his own. Finally, certain essential requisites of life - food and perhaps housing, but certainly urban amenities - had the greatest difficulty in keeping pace with the expansion of the cities, or the population as a whole, and sometimes clearly did not keep pace. Thus the supplies of meat for London almost certainly lagged behind the city's population from 1800 until the 1840s.



Thirdly, there is no dispute about certain classes of the population, whose conditions undoubtedly deteriorated. These were the agricultural labourers (about one million working men in 1851), at all events those in the south and east of England, and the smallholders and crofters in the Celtic fringe of Scotland and Wales. (The eight and a half million Irishmen, of course, mainly peasants, were pauperized beyond belief. Something not far short of a million of them actually starved to death in the Famine of 1846-7, the greatest human catastrophe of the nineteenth century anywhere in the world). There were further the declining industries and occupations, displaced by technical progress, of whom the half-million handloom weavers are the best known example, but by no means the only one. They starved progressively in a vain attempt to compete with the new machines by working more and more cheaply. Their numbers had doubled between 1788 and 1814 and their wages risen markedly until the middle of the Wars; but between 1805 and 1833 they fell from 23 shillings a week to 6s 3d. There were also the non-industrialized occupations which met the rapidly growing demand for their goods, not by technical revolution, but by sub-division and 'sweating' - e.g. the innumerable seamstresses in their garrets or cellars.

Whether, if we were to add up all the hard-pressed sections of the labouring poor and set against them those who managed somewhat to improve their incomes, we would find a net average gain or loss, is an insoluble question, for we simply do not know enough about earnings, unemployment, retail prices and other necessary data, to answer it decisively. There was, quite certainly, no significant general improvement. There may or may not have been deterioration between the middle 1790s and the middle 1840s. Thereafter, there was undoubted improvement - and it is the contrast between this (modest as it was) and the earlier period, that really says all we need to know. After the early forties consumption rose markedly - until then it had crawled along without much change. After the 1840s - still, and rightly, named the 'Hungry Forties' even though in Britain (But not in Ireland) things improved during most of them, unemployment undoubtedly declined sharply. For instance, no subsequent cyclical depression was even faintly as catastrophic as the slump of 1841-2. And above all, the sense of imminent social explosion, which had been present in Britain almost without interruption since the end of the Napoleonic Wars (except in most of the 1820s), disappeared. Britons ceased to be revolutionary.

Of course this pervasive social and political unrest reflected not merely material poverty but social pauperization: the destruction of old ways of life without the substitution of anything the labouring poor could regard as a satisfactory equivalent. But whatever the motives, waves of desperation broke time and again over the country: in 1811-13, in 1815-17, in 1819, in 1826, in 1829-35, in 1838-42, in 1843-4, in 1846-8. In the agricultural areas they were blind, spontaneous, and, in so far as their objectives were at all defined, almost entirely economic. As a rioter from the Fens put it in 1816: 'Here I am between Earth and Sky, so help me God. I would sooner lose my life than go home as I am. Bread I want and bread I will have'.<sup>x</sup>

Phases of the movement stressing political and trade-unionist agitation tended to alternate, the former being normally by far the more massive: politics predominated in 1815-19, 1829-32, and above all in the Chartist era (1838-48), industrial organization in the early 1820s and 1833-8. However, from about 1830 all these movements became more self-consciously and characteristically proletarian. The agitations of 1829-35 saw the rise of the idea of the 'general trades union' and its ultimate weapon, which might be used for political purposes, the 'general strike'; and Chartism rested firmly on the foundation of working-class consciousness, and in so far as it envisaged any real method of achieving its ends, relied on hopes of a general strike or, as it was then called,



together, or revived them after their periodic defeat and disintegration, was the universal discontent of men who felt themselves hungry in a society reeking with wealth, enslaved in a country which prided itself on its freedom, seeking bread and hope, and receiving in return stones and despair.

And were they not justified? A Prussian official, travelling to Manchester in 1814 had made a moderately cheerful judgement:

The cloud of coal vapour may be observed from afar. The houses are blackened by it. The river which flows through Manchester, is so filled with waste dye-stuffs that it resembles a dyer's vat. The whole picture is a melancholic one. Nevertheless, everywhere one sees busy, happy and well-nourished people, and this raises the observer's spirits. ∅

No observer of Manchester in the 1830s and 1840s - and there were many - dwelt on its happy, well-fed people. 'Wretched, defrauded, oppressed, crushed human nature lying in bleeding fragments all over the face of society', wrote the American, Colman, of it in 1845. 'Every day that I live I thank Heaven that I am not a poor man with a family in England'. Can we be surprised that the first generation of the labouring poor in industrial Britain looked at the results of capitalism and found them wanting?

x William Dawson of Upwell, quoted in A.J.Peacock, Bread or Blood

∅ Fabriken-Kommissarius, May 1814 (see note 2, chapter 3)