

Eric V. Snow

DECLINE AND RISE:

A Look at the Standard of Living for the English Working Class, 1730-1850

Did the standard of living and the quality of life improve or deteriorate for the English working class as a whole during the period of the industrial revolution (c. 1770-1850)? Charged with political and philosophical overtones, the standard of living controversy has generated much heat and not as much light as we might like over the past 200 years. Part of the reason for the continuance of this controversy is simply a lack of statistical documentation of economic conditions during these years, and the wide variation in economic conditions from one region of Britain to another. However, though the defects of the evidence that is available always add a measure of uncertainty to any broad generalizations that are made, it can be stated with reasonable certainty that in the crucial period of 1780-1820 that decline or at best stagnation in living standards was experienced by the English working class, but that improvements occurred with slow but gathering speed in the 1820-50 period.

One immense problem that plagues this controversy concerning the standard of living in this period is the political and philosophical biases of the historians involved. The condition of the English working class in this period is used to judge and convict, or exonerate and praise, industrial capitalism. Hence, such historians as Clapham, Hartwell, and Ashton with a free market bent are "optimists": They believe the average Englishman's standard of living rose during this time. Their antagonists are dubbed "pessimists," for they believe the working class' standard of living fell in this time period. The historians who are pessimists are mostly Marxists or Labourites in political sympathies: Hobsbawm, Thompson, and the Hammonds.¹

Hence, we can find Friedrich Engel's Condition of the Working Class in England

¹Notice Phyllis Deane, The First Industrial Revolution (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 256-257.

contains a great deal of scholarly dishonesty and/or sloppiness through the use of twisted quotations and the presenting of earlier conditions as equally common contemporary problems.² However, such bias is hardly restricted to the left: The brief polemical work by Robert Hessen, a historian who was a disciple of the notoriously pro-capitalist novelist Ayn Rand, is a good example of right wing bias at work.³ Such differing political views introduce biased readings of the evidence by the respective schools of thought, but this aspect of the controversy has had the positive effect of helping to motivate historians to dig for and organize almost every scrap of statistical evidence available.⁴

Immediately faced by anyone researching this area is the lack of good statistical data for much of this period. For example, no census of the English population was done in the entire eighteenth century. Not until 1841 do we get a complete census of the workforce's occupations for England. Data on prices and wage rates is found by historians only when fortuitously preserved. For instance, T.S. Ashton made an index of prices for the city of Oldham for the years 1791 to 1809 (albeit with some gaps) only because some man who kept the city's chronicle at whim chose to write down the retail prices of certain basic foodstuffs as found in that city.⁵ The mental image of historians scrounging for evidence in partial darkness should be kept in mind by readers for all generalizations made by them for this period's economic conditions for the average member of the working class.

Another related problem concerns not the evidence's paucity, but how hard it is to extrapolate from what evidence is available. For the economy of

²See the summary of W.O. Henderson and W.H. Challoner's edition of Engel's work in Paul Johnson, Intellectuals (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 65-66.

³See his two essays in Ayn Rand, Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 110-117.

⁴The lack of new evidence being found is mentioned in E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Standard of Living during the Industrial Revolution: A Discussion," Economic History Review, August 1963, p. 120. However, through regional studies and other "micro" approaches new evidence has continued to be unearthed, though nothing decisive has appeared.

⁵See Ashton in Arthur J. Taylor, ed., The Standard of Living in Britain in the Industrial Revolution (London: Methuen, 1975). p. 53-54.

pre-industrial England was mostly nationally unintegrated, and this continued to be the situation except as industrialization gradually integrated it.

For it was only due to the industrial revolution that England's economy became integrated enough that we can begin to speak of "national wage rates" or "national prices."⁶ Prior to this period, it was quite possible for one agricultural district to be enjoying a bumper crop, with another area less than 50 miles away existing on the verge of starvation. The level of labor mobility was particularly low, which made it easier for landowners to take advantage of their landless agricultural workers. Paying low wages would not automatically drive the latter away to another locality's employer.

Farm labour in southern England was notoriously immobile, all but the most enterprising kept at home by a combination of apathy, ignorance, the restraints of the Settlement Law, and the lack of the means of moving.

Because of these wide regional variations, it is always dangerous to extrapolate from one region's experience to another's, or to the nation as a whole. Large numbers of time-consuming regional studies would be necessary in order to solve this problem--assuming the evidence is there to begin with. The temptation to generalize and extrapolate in historians, is particularly deeply implanted, but they need to be particularly wary about doing this in this controversy without admitting the tentativeness this procedure introduces into their conclusions.⁸

Nonetheless, even admitting to the major defects in the evidence fortuitously preserved, and knowing the hazards of extrapolation and generalization, we should still be willing to take a shot at judging the overall condition of the English working class in this period. For the human mind has its intrinsic limitations, and can only handle so many minute details and facets about this or that problem without using generalization to bring order to them. For starting with a general statement in organizing information mentally, and then adding supporting details, makes information much easier

⁶See Deane, The First Industrial Revolution, p. 17-18, 38, 262-264.

⁷G.E. Mingay in Arthur Seldon, ed., The Long Debate on Poverty (Surrey, England: The Institute of Economic Affairs, 1972), p. 35.

⁸See Aston's comments in Taylor, The Standard of Living.

to handle since some organization has been applied to disorder. We just should not take our generalizations in this case (anyway) to be much more than informed opinion. Historians ^{simply need to avoid} dogmatizations on this subject, and remember, as many social scientists performing experiments do, the immense diversity of environments and ^{varied} people's individual reactions to their surroundings.

It seems safe to say on the basis of the available evidence that the English working class' overall standard of living in the 1730-55 period was relatively high compared to the medieval past, then underwent a modest decline in the 1756-92 period, suffered a serious decline during the period of the French Wars (1792-1815), endured a period of high unemployment in the 1815-19 period, albeit with wage gains for those still employed, then experienced a gradually increasing standard of living in the 1820-42 period, followed by a significant improvement during the rest of the 1840's and afterwards. Such a broad statement should not be taken to mean that we should ignore regional variations, such as how the industrial area of agricultural Lancashire's workers had much higher wages than southern England's very poorly paid agricultural workers. We should not ignore the differing experiences by distinct strata or occupational groups within the working class. E.P. Thompson once remarked that if the debate on the standards of living only involved "skilled 'society men' in regular employment, the controversy as to artisan living standards would long ago have been resolved in favour of the optimists."¹⁰ Finally, the problems with whether the quality of life improved with industrialization, which involves largely non-quantifiable value judgments, are not considered by the generalization above.

It could be one of the sources of the idea of a "golden age" for English working people lies in the long run of good harvests in England in the

⁹John Rule, The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England 1750-1850 (New York: Longman, 1986), p. 38, 48.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 36.

1730-55 period (1740 excepted).¹¹ For in an economy that is mostly agricultural and in which the price of food takes up the lion share's of the average family's budget, the weather bulks as an unusually important force in people's lives economically. From such a viewpoint, having the right weather for growing crops is not just "nice to have," but the difference between starvation and plenty. And low prices for food greatly benefited workers, especially those in towns, for 80%+ of the average working family's budget would be spent on food.¹² Since this period coincided with much of the "gin age," some measure of prosperity is indicated (though in a often socially harmful way).

Some statistical evidence for 1730-55's prosperity is indicated in a table concerning the cost of living in London from 1695 to 1815. Using 1700 for a base figure of 100, and excepting the bad harvest year of 1740 (with an index number of 119), the average index number is only 93. for this period. By comparison, the average is 126 in the 1770s, and 131 in the 1780s. Admittedly, such an index ignores the average wage that purchases the items making up a cost of living index. However, Gilboy also supplies an index of real wages for London and Lancashire, which shows significantly higher wages for the years 1730-55 as compared to immediately preceding and following periods. The years in question for the index of London provide an average of 125, while the average is, respectively, 95 and 94 for the 1770s and 1780s, and the average for the 1710-29 period is 108. For Lancashire, the years under consideration yield an average index number of 143, as compared to a level of 113 for 1710-29. However, in Lancashire in the 1770s and 1780s, the average index number is 158, which no doubt is a reflection the industrialization of the cotton textile industry there.¹³ (As always; we have to keep in mind the existence of regional variations). Now while Tucker's chart of real

wages for London artisans indicate a drift downward within the 1730-55

¹¹ See the mention of good harvests in this period in Deane, The First Industrial Revolution, p. 31.

¹² John Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 48. ¹³ E. W. Gilboy in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 81. These averages are rounded, and will be for now on as well.

period, and afterwards into the 1790s on into the French Wars, this index still shows the 1730-55 period's average prosperity to be higher than that experienced for the rest of the century.¹⁴

For the period 1756-90, a period of gradual decline or at best stagnation occurred for the average Englishman ^{and Englishwoman.} The Gilboy index for London has an average index number for real wages of 115 for 1756-69, 95 for the 1770s, and 94 for the 1780s.¹⁵ For Lancashire, the corresponding numbers are 132, 157, and 160, which reflect the ability of the cotton textile industry to raise wages in this region as industrialization took off.¹⁶ Tucker's index of real wages for London artisans shows a similar downward trend. The average index number for 1730-39 is 74, for 1740-55 is 57, for 1756-69, 52, for the 1770s, 49, and for the 1780s is 48.¹⁷ Wages for males rose in East Anglia and the Home Counties for 30 years after 1740, and then stabilized for the roughly 20 years before the French Wars began.¹⁸ Hence, P. Horne is justified in saying by the 1790s the standard of living had been falling for 40 years due to rising population and food prices.¹⁹

In the war period, from 1792 to 1815, it seems the average real wage must have fallen. For the burden of these wars should not be underestimated: the government's expenditures more than doubled, from an index number of 253 in 1790 to 607 in 1800.²⁰ One out of ten in the labor force were in the armed forces.²¹ War time inflation and taxes reduced the standard of living for the average person in England.

Hence, it is reasonable to look for a sharper decline in the 1790-1815 period than had occurred from 1756-89. The Tucker index has an average

¹⁴See Rufus S. Tucker, in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 27-29.

¹⁵The 1780s figures only go up to 1787 for London. See Gilboy in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 12-13.

¹⁶Adult male textile workers earned 1.3 to 3 times the average wage of northern farm laborers. Of course, the women and children in this industry did not earn as much as this. See Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 37.

¹⁷See Tucker in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 27-28.

¹⁸Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 39.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 38.

²⁰Phyllis Deane and W.A. Cole, British Economic Growth 1688-1959 Trends and Structure (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 78.

²¹Deane. The First Industrial Revolution p. 265

real wage index number of 47 for 1790-94, 43 for 1795-99, 37 for 1800-09, and 39 for 1810-15.²² The 1800-09 figure constitutes a drop of 35% from the 1730-55 figure. Using the index of London bread prices computed with the Wood-Bowley money wages index to yield a real wage index, we find real wages fell from an index number of 100 in 1790 to 62 in 1800, with a slight recovery to 70 to 1816. Using the same money wage index for each, the Gay-Rostow-Schwarz wholesale prices index goes from an index of 86 in 1790 to 65 in 1800 to 92 in 1816, the Rousseaux wholesale price index of agricultural products goes from 71 in 1800 to 108 in 1816, and the Wood retail prices index goes from 95 in 1790, to 73 in 1800, to 97 in 1816.²³ For the city of Bath, the real wage for non-agricultural workers went from an index number of 90 for the 1780s to 89 in the 1790s followed by a 68 for the 1800-12 period.²⁴ Hence, there is good evidence for the French Wars depressing the standard of living.

However, at this point, a general optimist rebuttal needs to be considered. It is possible to make estimates of national income (or GNP) and the total population for the 1750-1850 period, and so calculate per capita income. ~~Such figures show increases that seem implausible during this period,~~ especially if military expenditures are not removed before calculating per capita income. Using figures calculated by J.E. Williams, consumption per head minus defense spending in England and Wales was £10.1 in 1751, £8.3 in 1761, £10.5 in 1771, £12.4 in 1781, and £12.0 in 1791. For all of Britain (including now Scotland), the figures deduced are £8.7 for 1801, £11.8 for 1811, £14.2 for 1821, £15.5 for 1831, £17.6 for 1841, and £24.5 for 1851. This list of figures does violate my overall schema considerably, but not terribly, for it shows a fall from the "golden age" year of 1751 to 1761, but then an increase from 1771 to 1791, an evident decline to 1801's level (the addition of the Scots muddies the waters), an increase during

²²See Tucker in Taylor, *The Standard of Living*, p. 28-29.

²³Taylor, *The Standard of Living*, p. xxv.

²⁴R.S. Neale, "The Standard of Living, 1780-1844: A Regional and Class Study," *Economic History Review*, December 1966, p. 600.

²⁵J.E. Williams, "The British Standard of Living 1750-1850," *Economic History Review* 1966

during the wars to 1811, and continuous but gradual increases to 1841, with a significant rise by 1851.

Considering such figures, especially the ones without military expenditures removed, it is hard to understand much of the working class' unrest or discontent in this overall period (1790-1850), especially in the 1801-21 stretch.²⁶ Hobsbawm very aptly comments on such per capita national income figures:

Thus, were we to use only the movement of national income per capita as a guide to the movement of actual real incomes, we might (if we accept the figures of J. E. Williams) be forced into the manifestly implausible position of believing that the standard of living improved more rapidly between 1800 and 1840 than between 1850 and 1890. What seems implausible is not necessarily untrue, but in this instance it can seem plausible, let alone persuasive, only if we put out of our minds most of what we know about the standard of living in both periods and what contemporaries thought about it.²⁷

Additionally, the reliability of such estimates of national income per capita is questionable to a significant degree, especially for the pre-1800 figures.²⁸ A simultaneous shift could have occurred in the distribution of wealth towards the upper and middle classes, which then would make compatible compatible rising per capita national income figures with the evidence

for the fall in working class living standards pointed to by other data for the period of the French Wars.²⁹ (However, once military expenditures are subtracted, such a discrepancy is not very large, for the above figures do show a drop from 1791 to 1801). Williams himself summarizes these figures by saying: ". . . real private consumption showed little or no improvement between 1751 and 1811."³⁰ Hence, such figures do provide some problems for my schema, but not as many as it first may seem.

The improvement for the postwar period (1815-50) seems to have been largely confined to the post-1842 period, at least as Hobsbawm sees it.³¹

²⁶Hobsbawm points out that if the standard of living was rising during this period, but working class discontent was pervasive, then quality of life issues are shown to be highly important. E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Standard of Living during the Industrial Revolution: A Discussion I," *Economic History Review*, August 1963, p. 128-131.

²⁷Hobsbawm in Taylor, *The Standard of Living*, p. 181. Also see *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁸Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution*, p. 258.

²⁹*Ibid.*, See however R.M. ^{Hartwell} and S. Engerman's reply to such reasoning in Taylor, *The Standard of Living*, p. 203-212.

³⁰Williams "The British Standard of Living" p. 586

Using the Tucker index of real wages, we have an increase to 42 for the 1816-19 period, to 51 for 1820-29, to 53 for 1830-39, and 52 for 1840-49. (However, note the average is 56 for 1848-58, after the bad year of 1847).³² For Bath, after an average of 68 for 1800-12, the next available set of years, 1832-39, has an average index number of 92, and for 1840-44, 135.³³ Using the Wood-Bowley money wage index to calculate real wages, the Wood retail prices index goes from 97 in 1816, to 105 in 1831 to 100 in 1840, to 108 in 1850; the Gayer-Rostow-Schwarz wholesale prices index from 92 in 1816, to 109 in 1831, to 100 in 1840, to 140 by 1850; the Rousseau wholesale price index of agricultural products goes from 108 in 1816, to 113 in 1831, to 100 in 1840, and 143 in 1850; and the index of London bread prices from 70 in 1816, to 101 in 1831, to 100 in 1840, and to 148 by 1850.³⁴ Between 1830 and 1840, "Professor Phelps Brown's index of builders' wage rates, expressed in terms of the basket of consumers' good they might buy, suggests an improvement of about 5 per cent . . . "³⁵ Hence, in the twenty to twenty five years after the end of the French wars (1815-40), the Wood, Rousseau, and Brown indexes show modest gains of under 10%, the Tucker index an increase of 25%, the Bath index 35% (from 1800-12 to 1832-1839, however), the London bread index 42%, but the Gayer-Rostow-Schwarz index a decrease of 7%. An improvement is indicated for 1820-40, but it was probably not a very big one,³⁶ and most of the improvement for the overall postwar period (1815-1850) seems to have come after the severe recession of 1842.³⁷

A major aspect of this controversy that is often overlooked that can empty it of much of its political content is industrial capitalism's ability to "pass the buck." That is, definitely operating in England in this same 1780-1850 period were other factors that very plausibly could be blamed for

³¹Hobsbawm, "The Standard of Living," p. 121, 123.

³²Tucker in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 29-30.

³³Neale, "The Standard of Living, 1780-1844," p. 601.

³⁴Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. xxv.

³⁵Deane, The First Industrial Revolution, p. 267.

³⁶Increased levels of unemployment due to the possible intensification of the business cycle or postwar adjustment could have been involved. See the discussion below.

³⁷Notice the Hartwell-Hobsbawm dispute concerning this point in "The Standard of Living"

lowered living standards. Already mentioned has been the French Wars of 1792-1815, which through high taxes, government borrowing, and wartime inflation, drove down the standard of living. Besides the American Civil War of 1861-65, the French Wars were the closest approach the West made to total war prior to the First World War, which helps to illustrate the economic strains involved. Unlike her allies, such as Austria, Prussia, and Russia, who would drop out and/or switch sides, Britain was almost continually at war during this period (excepting the unwisely made and very brief peace of Amiens), upping the military costs involved.

Also, during the general period from 1756 onwards to the disastrous years of 1800-01, Britain suffered from an unusually large number of bad harvests.³⁸ For an economy whose agricultural sector still made up a bit over 50% of the GNP, ^{even} in 1850, these bad harvests would have dire economic effects, especially when so much of the typical working class family's budget was spent on food. An enormous, unprecedented increase in population occurred in the period 1750-1850, which also put serious downward pressures on living standards. The population of England (including Wales) rose from 6.1 million in 1750 to 7.1 million in 1770 to 8.2 million in 1790 to 9.0 million in 1800, 10.3 million in 1810, and 12.1 million in 1820. Subtracting out a rough 2 million for Scotland's population for the figures for Britain in 1831-51, we obtain figures of 14.4 million for 1831, 16.5 for 1841, and 18.9 for 1851.³⁹ With this tripling of population in only 100 years, it would be easy to imagine a Malthusian crisis striking England, although, as noted above, since per capita income did increase in this period (1780-1850) overall, this population explosion disaster was avoided. Ireland was not so fortunate. The implications of such population figures can be simply put: The appalling bare subsistence conditions under which southern agricultural laborers existed can be read as the near approach of

³⁸Deane, The First Industrial Revolution, p. 26, 31.

³⁹Deane and Cole, British Economic Growth, p. 6, 8, 65.

a Malthusian disaster, as opposed to the evils of enclosure or greedy landlords merely. As a result of such population growth, the countryside of Southern England was overpopulated, putting severe downward pressure on wages. (By contrast, in Lancashire where the alternative of industrial employment existed, the wages of agricultural laborers was considerably higher, as illustrated partially by Gilboy's two indexes above). Whether we like it or not, since labor is a commodity on the open market, the price of labor (i.e. wages) suffers the same fate as does the price of American wheat when farmers grow a bumper crop: the price falls. In addition, part of this natural increase for England was due to Irish immigrants, who normally ended up with the worst jobs and worst living conditions in England, such as by ^{largely} inhabiting the notorious cellar dwellings of Manchester.⁴⁰ Hence, with the effects of war, bad harvests, rapid population growth (including Irish immigration), it is remarkable wages even held steady, let alone rose for the 1750-1850 period.⁴¹ It could well be the increased productivity made possible by the factory system and the industrial revolution prevented the collapse in living standards and famine, as Ireland suffered during this same period.⁴² As T.S. Ashton put it:

There are to-day on the plains of India and China men and women, plague-ridden and hungry, living lives little better, to outward appearance, than those of the cattle that toil with them by day and share their places of sleep by night. Such Asiatic standards, and such unmechanized horrors, are the lot of those who increase their numbers without passing through an industrial revolution.⁴³

Turning away from consideration of real wages, we can consider investigating what the English working class actually spent its wages on.

By far the biggest item in its budget was food. Approximately 80% or

⁴⁰Rhodes Boyson in Seldon, The Long Debate on Poverty, p. 74-76.

⁴¹Compare Mingay in Ibid., p. 42.

⁴²Many at least indirect mentions of factors outside of industrial capitalism's effects on the standard of living in England for this period could be cited. For two of the clearest, see Ashton's and Hartwell and Engerman's comments in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 36, 190, 192-194.

⁴³T.S. Ashton, The Industrial Revolution 1760-1830 (London: Oxford University Press 1976).

more of the typical working class family's income was spent on food.⁴⁴

Agricultural laborers' budgets would often record nothing as being spent on clothing.⁴⁵ The main item would be bread, as indicated by figures of per capita flour consumption of 12½ pounds, as found by Dr. Edward Smith in 1863, though potatoes became much more important after the bad harvests of 1795-96 and 1800-01 within England.⁴⁶

Many disputes break out among historians about the evidence on food consumption. Hartwell's and Hobsbawm's disputes over the implications of the Smithfield returns for London's meat consumption ^{are} an excellent case of this, as well as the fragmentary nature of the statistical evidence available to us today.⁴⁷ Since meat is a fairly good indicator of whether people had income to replace bread with meat, it indicates rising living standards (or falling ones) with a ^{significant} degree of certainty. The key thing to do when analyzing this particular issue is to do as Rule does (at least initially), and distinguish agricultural workers, especially those in the south, from industrial workers, miners, and townsmen in general. The southern farm laborers were so poor as to almost never have meat, at least after 1790, while adult male coalminers would eat 2-3 pounds a week.⁴⁸ Although Rule harshly criticizes Hartwell's figures for food and meat consumption in London, it should be realized that if we remember Hartwell is discussing London (as opposed to England in general), and urban workers in particular, they need not be rejected.⁴⁹ For it seems Rule's overall grim picture of decline is colored by overemphasizing the experience of southern agricultural workers relative to other workers.⁵⁰ Hartwell makes a useful counterpoint to Rule's gloomy picture, at least effective for the post-1830 period: If in the workhouses after 1834 where conditions were made

⁴⁴See the chart of 64 families in Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 48.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 68.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 49, 53.

⁴⁷The minutiae of the Smithfield returns are debated in Hobsbawm and Hartwell, in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 77-78, 86-88, 113-114; and in Hobsbawm and Hartwell, "The Standard of Living," p. 132-133, 144-145.

⁴⁸Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 54-56.

⁴⁹See Rule, Ibid., p. 62; Hartwell in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 116-117.

deliberately bad to discourage entrants meat was served regularly, is it possible "that it was not eaten regularly by the labouring poor?"⁵¹ Of six workhouse diets in 1834, one served meat three times a week, one once a week, and four twice a week. The differing and more fortunate experience of townsmen is illustrated by a quote describing textile operatives' experience by the likes of Friedrich Engels:

(T)he better-paid workers—particularly when the whole family works in the factories—enjoy good food as long as they are in employment. they have meat every day and bacon and cheese for the evening meal. The lower-paid workers have meat only two or three times a week, and sometimes only on Sundays.⁵²

Anyway, the decline Rule sees between 1790 to 1850 includes mention of the war years, so my schema is not too badly violated by his conclusions even for agricultural workers until after the war and postwar recession is over.⁵³

Admittedly, sugar consumption does present a fairly serious challenge to my schema, for in the terrible year of 1801 it was 30.6 pounds, then declined to 29.3 by 1811, fell to 15.3 in 1840, but rose to 24.9 by 1850.⁵⁴ However, as Hartwell points out, it was not an item of great importance in the working class standard of living in this time, so it may not be in this case a good indicator of living standards since they had not had much experience with it yet.⁵⁵

Housing is another area of working class life that was notoriously bad during the industrial revolution. The grim picture of Manchester, Leeds, and Liverpool, with their back-to-back houses, streets used as open sewers, and whole families dwelling in cellars with muddy floors is a mental image of the industrial revolution known to virtually anyone who has studied the subject at all. However, it has to be realized that the problem was

⁵⁰Note this comment in Rule, *The Labouring Classes*, p. 51: "Smith's findings both confirm the persistence of regional variations and deny any real validity for claims of dietary improvement before 1850, for a comparison of his figures 1850, with the findings of the *Morning Chronicle* reporters suggests strongly that any advances in the food consumption of farm labourers (notice) and their families was slight and took place after mid-century."

⁵¹Hartwell, "The standard of Living II," p. 145.

⁵²As quoted by Boyson in Seldon, *The Long Debate on Poverty*, p. 71.

⁵³Since my schema relies mostly on the earnings of urban workers in real wage indexes, this could account for the difference.

⁵⁴Rule, *The Labouring Classes*, p. 61.

not normally in the quality of the brick houses themselves, for even when very cheaply thrown together, their construction was superior to the cob and thatch of rural laborers' houses. Rather, "It was not so much their individual deficiencies, but the collective environmental horror which they presented which shocked contemporaries . . ."56 The lack of any kind of city planning or concern for sanitation was a major reason for why the death rates for city dwellers were so much higher than for worse paid, even worse housed, rural workers.57 However, the error here was for builders to think that building ^{merely} a larger version of what were still effectively medieval towns in living conditions would not have dire effects. And in London, if not in the new industrial towns, the death rate for children under the age of five did fall during the period of the industrial revolution, from 74.5% in 1730-49 to 31.8% in 1810-29.58 The conditions in which many agricultural laborers and industrial workers experienced in this time were little different from what had existed long before the industrial revolution, for the conditions of rural housing in particular was nothing new. "However attractive they might look from a distance, for the most part country cottages could hardly survive closer inspection."59 Clay with straw ("cob") would rot, the floor would be dirt or clay, the thatch would decay due to animal and vegetable wastes left inside, and droppings would fall from rats and other vermin dwelling in thatch roofs.60 Only because of the wide spaces and fresh air between houses--a luxury ^{lacking} in Manchester--kept agricultural workers from having equally bad if not worse life expectancies than the urban dwellers of the new industrial cities.

One related problem to determining the standard of living for the working class that is directly tied to wages is how much unemployment existed among

55Hartwell, "The Standard of Living II," p. 143.

56Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 87.

57In question is the chart Rule constructs that shows the gentry had higher life expectancies than tradesmen, who in turn lived significantly longer than the laborers in various early industrial towns. For instance, for Manchester the figures were 38, 20, and 17 respectively--very sobering statistics indeed.

58See Hessen in Ayn Rand, Capitalism, p. 110.

59Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 78.

60Ibid., p. 77.

workers. For real wage indexes do not reflect how much unemployment existed in a period directly, but only how much employed workers were paid. And nobody knows how much unemployment existed on a percentage basis any time during the 1750-1850 period for England as a whole. "All acknowledge its importance but conclude there is no fully satisfactory measure of its impact."⁶⁰

The real issue lurking here is whether the rise of industrial capitalism accentuated the business cycle, thus increasing the amount of unemployment at times, resulting in overall lower living standards. It is implied by Hobsbawm that the business (trade) cycle got worse in the 1780-1850 period: "Few (unemployment) would doubt that it was much higher than in the period after the middle forties, but its effect on real wages, though plainly serious, remains to be investigated."⁶¹ Hartwell replies: "There was a cycle in the eighteenth century, and again after 1850, but it has not yet been proved that the cycle between 1800 and 1850 was responsible, proportionately, for more unemployment than the cycles before 1800 or after 1850."⁶² Taylor is basically inclined to agree with Hartwell that the business cycle was not any worse in this period.⁶³ Due to a lack of ^{relevant} statistics, it is hard for one side to fully defeat the other on this subject, although if the optimist side can prove its case, it would be yet another example of ~~alleviating~~ the blame that traditionally fell upon capitalism for the bad conditions of the industrial revolution by proving the condition in question (much like child labor or poor urban housing) also existed before it.

Finally, some brief words about the quality of life issue should be considered, for most of what has been discussed above involves material conditions and things. Because of the uprooting of people from traditional ways of agricultural life occurred, it took many years for individuals and

⁶⁰Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 39.

⁶¹Hobsbawm, "The Standard of Living," p. 121.

⁶²his emphasis, Hartwell, "The Standard of Living," p. 138.

⁶³Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. xxix. However, he still thinks that more unemployment may have existed in this period due to rapid population growth.

society as a whole to get used to the new work discipline, and the new urban surroundings. As the Hammonds pointed out many times in their works, the new way of life was not always pleasing to people, even if they may have had a higher standard of living. Medieval towns and cities had a much more active civic life of processions and celebrations than the new urban centers created by the factory system did, which reflected a sense of community not often found in the latter. Getting used to the discipline and intensity of factory work took at least two generations to ^{fully} accomplish, and until then, many suffered cultural shock.⁶⁴ This is not to say all these things were necessarily in the end intrinsically bad, for once people got used to the new ways over the course of one or two generations, the cultural shock involved in (say) factory work discipline would wear off. And the idea that agricultural work is intrinsically more satisfying and less alienating is questionable, for the generations of peasants and farm laborers who have "voted with their feet" to move to cities (a process very much evident in the Third World countries today, even if the "attraction" involves living in shanty towns and uncertain opportunities for employment) show there must be something displeasing intrinsically with village/farm life. As they said of American soldiers from farms who went to France and its cities during World War I, How are you going to keep them on the farm after seeing Paris? As Boyson commented on this subject of alienation:

This process of accepting higher wages with a rise in the standard of living as the price of the factory routine is paralleled amongst modern car workers who prefer the higher wages on routine production lines to the lower wages and less supervision and pressure of small shop, park, or bus work. (Through the use of Japanese management techniques that solicit worker involvement, such alienation can be reduced as well, it should be noted--EVS). Unwelcome as this observation might be to the romantic poets, these men realise that higher wages give more choice of leisure activities and an improvement in their home conditions: for these advantages they are prepared to accept work-hour regulations.⁶⁵

Additionally, the industrial revolution had one eventual result that was a qualitative improvement:

⁶⁴Rule, The Labouring Classes, p. 134-138.

⁶⁵Boyson in Seldon, The Long Debate on Poverty, p. 70.

It was during the industrial revolution, moreover, and largely because of the economic opportunities it afforded to working-class women (at least to those women who actually worked in the mills), that there was the beginning of that most important and most beneficial of all the social revolutions of the last two centuries, the emancipation of women.⁶⁶

Hence, feminists may not wish to dwell upon the negative qualitative effects of the industrial revolution, for in the long run it opened up a greater degree of economic independence for women.

In the evidence I introduced above, I attempted to show that the standard of living for the English working class fell from 1756 to at least 1815, and then improved afterwards, gradually at first. While not all the evidence fits my schema, such as the per capita national income figures, perfectly, much of the evidence does. And through saying that this decline in living standards had much to do with war, bad harvests, and population growth, I have made compatible a degree of pessimism with pro-capitalism. For those on the right I say, let us admit that bad things did occur during the industrial revolution, but that many of these things were hangovers from the prior industrial era that industrial capitalism eventually allowed to be eliminated (such as child labor, which was a ^{transitional} horror story), or that something else is at fault. Hence, admitting bad conditions during the industrial revolution, or that they did get worse during it, need not indict the most efficient economic system humanity has devised: capitalism.

⁶⁶Hartwell in Taylor, The Standard of Living, p. 123.

Summary chart for real wage indexes for the 1700-1850 period for England

Gilboy--cost of living only

1700	1730-55	(1740)	1770-79	1780-89
100	93	119	126	131

Gilboy--real wages--London

1710-29	1730-55	1756-69	1770-79	1780-89
108	125	115	95	94

Gilboy--real wages--Lancashire

1710-29	1730-55	1756-69	1770-79	1780-89
113	143	132	157	160

Tucker--real wages for artisans--London

1730-39	1740-55	1756-69	1770-79	1780-89	1790-94	1795-99	1800-09
74	57	52	49	48	47	43	37

1810-15	1816-19	1820-29	1830-39	1840-49	1848-58
39	42	51	53	52	56

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using London bread prices

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
100	62	70	101	100	148

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using the Gay-Rostow-Schwarz prices index

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
86	65	92	109	100	140

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using the Rousseaux wholesale price index

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
NA	71	108	113	100	143

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using the Wood retail price index

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
95	73	97	105	100	108

Bath--non-agricultural workers--real wage index

1780-89	1790-99	1800-12	1832-39	1840-44
90	89	68	92	135

National income figures, minus defense spending--for England and Wales up to 1791, for all of Britain afterwards--per capita figures, in pounds sterling

1751	1761	1771	1781	1791	1801	1811	1821	1831	1841	1851
10.1	8.3	10.5	12.4	12.0	8.7	11.8	14.2	15.5	17.6	24.5

Summary chart for real wage indexes for the 1700-1850 period for England

Gilboy--cost of living only

1700	1730-55	(1740)	1770-79	1780-89
100	93	119	126	131

Gilboy--real wages--London

1710-29	1730-55	1756-69	1770-79	1780-89
108	125	115	95	94

Gilboy--real wages--Lancashire

1710-29	1730-55	1756-69	1770-79	1780-89
113	143	132	157	160

Tucker--real wages for artisans--London

1730-39	1740-55	1756-69	1770-79	1780-89	1790-94	1795-99	1800-09
74	57	52	49	48	47	43	37

1810-15	1816-19	1820-29	1830-39	1840-49	1848-58
39	42	51	53	52	56

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using London bread prices

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
100	62	70	101	100	148

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using the Gay-Rostow-Schwarz prices index

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
86	65	92	109	100	140

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using the Rousseaux wholesale price index

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
NA	71	108	113	100	143

Wood-Bowley money wages index--using the Wood retail price index

1790	1800	1816	1831	1840	1850
95	73	97	105	100	108

Bath--non-agricultural workers--real wage index

1780-89	1790-99	1800-12	1832-39	1840-44
90	89	68	92	135

National income figures, minus defense spending--for England and Wales up to 1791, for all of Britain afterwards--per capita figures, in pounds sterling

1751	1761	1771	1781	1791	1801	1811	1821	1831	1841	1851
10.1	8.3	10.5	12.4	12.0	8.7	11.8	14.2	15.5	17.6	24.5