

AHEAD OF THE CURVE:

Belgium's Early Industrialization and Its Consequences For Its Workers

To which country was the term "industrial revolution" first applied to? If one replies, "England," one would be mistaken. N. Briavoinne used "the term 'industrial revolution' in its specific sense a half century before Anrold Toynbee in applying it to the various transformations that he had seen take place in Belgium since the last years of the 18th century."¹ Belgium was the first nation on the Continent to become industrialized in the manner England had become.² But what effects did this process of industrialization have on Belgium's workers? Did their standard of living rise or fall as a whole? What industries and regions of Belgium were transformed by its industrial revolution, and how did this affect the ways Belgian workers lived? Belgium's early industrialization involved a painful shift of economic gravity from the north and western Flemish areas, the old center of the linen and woolen textile trades, to the south and eastern Walloon areas, with their extensive coal and iron industries.³ This period of industrial transition caused a steep slide in the standard of living in Flemish areas, which was only compensated by the growth of the coal and metallurgical sectors in the south and western regions, and mechanized textile manufacture in Ghent and Verviers.

Belgium was a small but very potent nation industrially during the nineteenth century on into the twentieth. Despite being seriously hurt economically by various political transformations (from 1789 to 1830, essentially it shifted

from Austrian to French to Dutch control, followed by independence), it never-

¹Jan Craeybeckx, "The Beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in Belgium," in Rondo Cameron, Essays in French Economic History (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1970), p. 188.

²Rondo Cameron, A Concise Economic History of the World From Paleolithic Times to the Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 229, 232; Carl Strikwerda, "Interest-Group Politics and the International Economy: Mass Politics and Big Business Corporations in the Liege Coal Basin, 1870-1914," Journal of Social History, Winter 1991, p. 278; Craeybeckx, Ibid.

³This theme is developed at length in Allan H. Kittell, "The Revolutionary Period of the Industrial Revolution: Industrial Innovation and Population Displacement in Belgium, 1830-1880," Journal of Social History, Fall 1967, pp. 119-148.

theless became on a per capita basis by the 1880's the world leader "in major heavy industrial categories."⁴ While having "less than seven million people, Belgium ranked fifth in the world in the amount of industrial goods contributed to international trade." As recently as 1870, Belgium mined more coal than France, despite having a population only one seventh as large, and nearly half that of Germany, which had eight times more people.⁵ Its use of advanced industrial technology in iron and steel, such as the puddling and later Bessemer processes, helped Germany and France to industrialize.⁶ Belgium exported out of its steel output an amazing 80% in 1913, and had increased its share of world steel output from 2.35% to 3.20% from 1900 to 1913. (By contrast, Britain's share fell from 17.6% to 10.2% in the same period). In 1912 it had 7.84% of western Europe's steel production.⁷

Despite such statistics, Belgium has been ignored much more by historians than its small size would warrant. The first Newcomen steam engine pump built outside Britain was installed for a coal mine near Liege^{in 1720.} Nearly sixty Newcomen engines operated in the area that would become Belgium before the collapse of the Ancien Regime. Through Lievin Bauvens, a local business-^{some} man, ^{then} modern cotton textile machinery was smuggled out of Britain during the French wars, and set up in Ghent in 1801. Paul Huart-Chapel introduced Cort's puddling and rolling process into his Charleroi area ironworks, and had the first commercially successful coke-fired blast furnace on the Continent, which was fired up by 1827.⁸ Similarly, Francois Isidore Dupont had a rolling mill built in 1821, and installed a coke-fired blast furnace in 1829.⁹ William Cockerill, through a textile machine manufacturing plant in Verviers, moved to Liege in 1807, "is largely credited with 'reorganizing on modern lines the carding and spinning of wool and the weaving of woolen cloth in Belgium.'"¹⁰ The vast, vertically integrated Cockerill iron and machine works at Seraing employed some 2000 workers in 1830 and was likely the

⁵Strikwerda, "Interest-Group Politics," p. 278.

⁶Ibid.; For Belgium helping spread Cort's puddling process on the Continent after having learned it from Britain, see Rainer Fremdling, "The Puddler--a Craftsman's Skill and the Spread of a New Technology in Belgium, France and Germany," Journal of European Economic History, Winter 1991, p. 535.

⁷Strikwerda, "Interest Group Politics," p. 284.

largest such installation on the Continent.¹¹ It made Belgium's first locomotive in 1835. The Marcinelle works was nearly as vertically integrated, and "By 1841 the amalgamated iron works at Marcinelle and Couillet was probably the biggest iron works on the mainland."¹² With this series of feats, Belgium's role in the industrial revolution is plainly worth studying in detail.

But what effects did this process of industrialization have on the lives and working conditions of its workers? Did the mechanization of the old iron and textile industries which had existed in Belgium well into the medieval era, and even into the days of the Roman empire, raise the average worker's standard of living?¹³ Of course, the concept of the "average worker" is rather fictitious, since workers in different parts of Belgium benefited or were harmed by industrialization in different ways to greatly varying degrees. Flemish workers in the domestic (home-based) linen industry would have seen their livelihoods destroyed after the mechanization of linen making, while those in the south and eastern Walloon iron and coal industries, such as those in the then new art of puddling, would have substantially higher wages at the expense of often living in congested urban areas with their attendant sanitation problems.¹⁴

One unusual study which helps to indicate what the average standard of living was before the industrial revolution mechanized Belgium's domestic (cottage) industries was of sixteenth century nuns in the small town of

12 miles from the port of Antwerp.¹⁵ The order of the Beguines was not very strict, and its nuns were of general middle class background, so their eating habits would not have been especially different from other middle class people of the day, perhaps even working class. Their collective food purchases

⁸Cameron, A Concise Economic History, pp. 230-1.

⁹Carlo M. Cipolla, ed., The Fontana Economic History of Europe Volume 4 The Emergence of Industrial Societies part one (Nr Brighton, Sussex, England: The Harvester Press Limited, 1976), p. 340.

¹⁰Richard M. Westebbe, "State Entrepreneurship: King Willem I, John Cockerill, and the Seraing Engineering Works, 1815-1840," Explorations in Entrepreneurial History, vol. 8, no. 4, 1956, p. 209, as cites references therein.

¹¹Cameron, A Concise Economic History, p. 231-232; Joel Mokyr, Industrialization in the Low Countries, 1795-1850 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 59.

were generally preserved for the period 1526-75, so what their diet consisted of can be reconstructed.

Some of the salient points of their diet^{as} stands out in Schokkaert and are discussed below. Van der Wee's study [^]White bread was a luxury, eaten only on Sundays and special occasions in normal (non-high price) years. Beer was a major item in the diet, making up an average of 19% of the Infirmary's budget during this period. Beer consumption was very high for urban and rural lower and middle classes in Europe throughout the late medieval/early modern period. Wine was a great luxury, since it had to be imported, and made up only 1.5% of this nunnery's average food budget. Being a Catholic religious order, fish had its place in the diet for such periods as Lent and Advent, and made up about 3.7% of the nuns' food budget on average for 1526-75. Meat was a major part of their diet, coming to 23.7% of this period's average food budget. They did not cut back sharply on buying meat in years of high grain prices, which would put them at general variance with working class patterns of food consumption for this time. Rye is the main necessity for the nuns, coming to 41.3% of their food budget for 1550-1, which was not unusual. Hence rye bread was much more important to their diet than wheat, which made up only 6.1% of their food budget for the same period.¹⁶ While these nuns were mostly of a middle class background, and their patterns of consumption cannot be applied indiscriminately to workers, these general patterns indicate a probable maximum point for most Flemish workers for the diet they enjoyed.¹⁷

For example, if middle class nuns spent 41% of their income on rye and only 6% on wheat, then linen workers probably spent even more on rye, and still less

¹²Alan S. Milward and S. B. Saul, The Economic Development of Continental Europe 1780-1870 (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), p. 444.

¹³Cipolla, Fontana Economic History, p. 338; Kittell, "The Revolutionary Period," pp. 120, 129.

¹⁴Kittell, Ibid., pp. 145-146; Average wages for Belgian Metallurgical workers increased 44.6% from 1819 to 1846. See Mokyr, Industrialization, p. 188

¹⁵E. Schokkaert and H. Van der Wee, "Problems A Quantitative Study of Food Consumption in the Low Countries during the Sixteenth Century," Journal of European Economic History, Spring 1988, pp. 131-158.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 139, 140, 141, 142, 144, 149-150.

¹⁷Since a skilled worker in mid-sixteenth century Lier spent roughly 70% of his earnings on food, diet would constitute a major indicator of workers' overall living standards. Ibid., p. 137.

on wheat, and not vice versa. If white wheaten bread was a luxury for these nuns, even fewer Flemish workers would have enjoyed it. Hence, if the middle class nuns of the Beguine Order in the mid-sixteenth century enjoyed what would be a low standard of living (i.e. ate lots of dark rye bread), then that of the workers in domestic industry should have been even lower.

It has been observed that from the fourteenth century until the early twentieth the Flanders countryside "had only two periods of relative prosperity and high purchasing power for the people in the countryside," which occurred in the mid-fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The latter period (c. 1725-75) was called a "golden age" by some contemporaries.¹⁸ Hence, just as industrialization (more precisely, mechanization) took off in Belgium, Flemish workers in domestic industry had been enjoying a relatively high standard of living, before it was largely destroyed in the early to mid-nineteenth century by the factory system. On the other hand, it should be noted Mendels says: "Available evidence indicates that there was no increase in real wages during the eighteenth century in any area of Flanders."¹⁹ This discrepancy is perhaps best explained by noticing that if one compares the standard of living for Flemish workers in 1700 with that of (say) 1800, the mid-century improvement might have been missed if it had largely melted away by 1800. For instance, a table of real wages of bricklayers (not linen workers, it should be noted) expressed in terms of the litres of wheat they could buy after moving upwards by mid-century drifted downwards overall by the century's end: 1701-25, 9.7; 1726-50, 10.7; 1751-75, 9.3; 1776-1800, 7.8.²⁰ If one only had looked at the beginning and ending years, the mid-century uptick would have been missed.

One key aspect of why Flanders had had such extensive domestic textile industries, often done through the putting-out system, going back well into

the medieval era, was that most rural Flemish workers were paid unusually

¹⁸Christian Vandenbroeke, "The Regional Economy of Flanders and Industrial Modernization in the Eighteenth Century: a Discussion," Journal of European Economic History, Spring, 1987, pp. 151, 155, 166.

¹⁹Franklin F. Mendels, "Industry and Marriages in Flanders Before the Industrial Revolution," p. 83 in Paul Deprez, Population and Economics Proceedings of Section V of the Fourth Congress of the International Economic History Association (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1970).

low wages because such handicrafts were only a part-time job for most of the people involved in them. Milward and Saul described a pattern in the mid-nineteenth century about Belgian workers that went back many centuries:

"So small were the farms that the same labour force was frequently shared between agricultural and industrial employment. The factory worker returned to the smallholding after his day's work often at a considerable distance. . . . It seems to have developed from a long tradition of labour migration within Belgium and it was one reason for the relatively lower industrial wages in Belgium than France, for the entrepreneur did not need to entice his labour force permanently away from the land."²¹ Unlike the effects of the enclosure acts in England towards the end of the eighteenth century, the majority of Flemish families ^(generally as tenants) still had a piece of land.²² Much like Ireland, the holdings had been largely subdivided into very small holdings of a few acres each, and growing potatoes had become a very common practice. And like Ireland, Flanders suffered terribly during the potato blight of 1846-48, with extensive emigration occurring then to urban areas such as Antwerp or Ghent, or southwards into coal and iron areas of Wallonia.²³ Flanders was not called "The Ireland of the Continent" for no reason at all.²⁴ The low wages of Belgium (not just Flanders) are seen by Mokyr as a key reason for its industrializing before the Netherlands since it allowed profits (and hence reinvestment) to be significantly higher.²⁵

The result was that the living conditions for Flanders's domestic industry workers, which had not been especially high to begin with, plunged as mechanization proceeded in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The Flemish linen industry's weavers, according to one 1765 source, were paid seven to eight sous, "which enabled the weaver to subsist on a diet of rye bread, potatoes,

²⁰Vandenbroeke, "The Regional Economy," p. 166.

²¹Milward and Saul, The Economic Development, p. 452-453.

²²Vandenbroeke, "The Regional Economy," p. 168.

²³Ibid., p. 167; Kittell, "The Revolutionary Period," p. 127; Mokyr, Industrialization, p. 13-14.

²⁴Vandenbroeke, "The Regional Economy," p. 150.

²⁵Joel Mokyr, "The Industrial Revolution in the Low Countries in the First Half

buttermilk, a little bacon on Sundays, and water." Note that these were the conditions during aforementioned "golden age," which largely has been the situation for the masses throughout history, if not worse. Wages were even lower in 1789 according to another source.²⁶ However, due to having their own pieces of land (albeit as tenants normally), such low wages did not necessarily translate into a low standard of living relative to other pre-industrial times and places, since they could grow much of their own food. Later on, Lis and Soly found in Antwerp a serious decline in the average per capita diet for the 1807-59 period, both qualitatively and quantitatively, which they blame on Antwerp's ceasing to be an industrial center in favor of increasing its mercantile importance as a port and trading center.²⁷ Ghent, which was, by contrast, a major textile manufacturing factory city, suffered a similar decline in its standard of living as well during this period.²⁸ Mokyr reports that "In the nineteenth century, after a short boom during the Napoleonic Empire, the wages of linen weavers and spinners fell to new lows, reach catastrophic depths in the 1830's and 1840's."²⁹ The end result was that one of the most prosperous areas in eighteenth century Europe (for its place and time)--Flanders--became one of the most impoverished by the late nineteenth.³⁰

Now Lis and Soly conclude, although admitting generalizing may be "pre-mature," from their data on food consumption for Antwerp (1807-59) as well as from C. Vandenbroeke's for Ghent that: "We therefore consider that the absolute pauperization of large sectors of the Belgian population in this period was a general feature . . ."³¹ However, it appears that taking Belgium as a whole, instead of the increasingly impoverished Flemish areas alone, per capita caloric consumption merely stagnated from 1812 to 1846. Bekaert's figures indicate, in calories per day a slight increase from 1,993.9 to 2,004.9,

excluding alcoholic drinks, and a decline from 2,247.5 to 2238.5, when including of the Nineteenth Century: A comparative Case Study," Journal of Economic History, June 1974, pp. 378, 380-381.

²⁶Ibid., p. 382

²⁷C. Lis and H. Soly, "Food Consumption in Antwerp between 1807 and 1859: A Contribution to the Standard of Living Debate," Economic History Review, August 1977, p. 480.

them.³² The rise of the iron and coal industries in the south and eastern Walloon areas canceled out the increasing impoverishment of the north and western Flemish areas, marking a clear growing of inequality in income between these two regions.³³ It also appears income distribution became more unequal during industrialization in Belgium, for there was a growth in the consumption of luxury products such as wheat bread and tropical foodstuffs such as sugar by the middle class on the one hand, and a shift to using more potatoes and less rye by the working class on the other. Bekaert's figures show consumption in the 1812-46 period changed as follows: potatoes, 238.1 calories/day to 399.6; wheat, 362.4 to 445.4; rye, 507.5 to 410.8; tropical goods, 27.7 to 53.9.³⁴ Using similar trends in their data for Antwerp, Lis and Soly draw a similar conclusion.³⁵ Hence, while "the average person's" standard of living in Belgium did not deteriorate in the early nineteenth century, regional and class-based inequalities did increase.

Now, what was responsible for the impoverishment of Flanders and the increased prosperity of Wallonia? Lis and Soly blame the short-sightedness of businessmen who shifted capital from (alleged) industrial uses in Antwerp to mercantile and trading applications because greater short run profits existed there rather than in expanding the textile industry, which was more productive over the long run.³⁶ However, according to Dhondt and Bruwer, Antwerp had become a leading financial center after the Dutch had closed the Scheldt's access to the sea for it in 1648. After falling under French rule, the Scheldt was reopened, and the city expanded all its vast energy on the redevelopment of the port. These are the reasons why the Industrial Revolution

²⁸Lis and Soly, "Food Consumption," p. 462, 481.

²⁹Mokyr, "The Industrial Revolution," p. 382.

³⁰Vandenbroeke, "The Regional Economy," p. 154.

³¹Lis and Soly, "Food Consumption," p. 481.

³²Geert Bekaert, "Caloric Consumption in Industrializing Belgium," Journal of Economic History, September 1991, p. 635.

³³Ibid., p. 643; Kittell, "The Revolutionary Period," pp. 145-146.

³⁴Bekaert, "Caloric Consumption," pp. 635, 642-643.

³⁵Lis and Soly, "Food Consumption," p. 472.

³⁶Ibid., p. 480.

by-passed Antwerp."³⁷ While the latter point confirms Lis and Soly's viewpoint to a degree, the description of Antwerp as a financial center undermines their analysis, and it is not altogether clear why turning Antwerp into a great port gain, with its superior natural location, would be a bad long run use of capital, as they claim.

Kittell's argument for Flanders's impoverishment is decidedly more plausible. He maintains there was a lot of investment in the textile trades in Belgium, but that the process of mechanization and centralization in factories destroyed Flanders's domestic industries. As a result, many workers were impoverished, and others chose to emigrate to such cities in Flemish areas such as Ghent or Antwerp, or else south and east to such Walloon cities as Liege, Seraing, Namur, and Charleroi, cities of the rapidly growing iron, coal, and machine-building industries. With the mechanization of the linen textile industry in the 1830's and 1840's, the rural domestic linen industry suddenly collapsed, leaving many workers without the means to support themselves, or else being forced to take brutal pay cuts^{in order} to compete against machinery. By the latter means, a rural domestic linen industry lasted even into the early twentieth century, with the linen workers keeping their independence by "utilizing proportionately far more children, paying much lower wages, and demanding longer working hours than obtained in the rest of the textile industry."³⁸ A similar blow against the Flemish domestic cotton and woolen industries through the factory system was occurring, having begun at the turn of the 19th century through such entrepreneurs as William Cockerill and Lieven Bauwens, quickened rapidly after 1835 until these two industries had been totally transformed as well through mechanization by 1860.³⁹ While a number of these textile mills had been set up in Ghent, which is in Flanders, nevertheless a terrible disruption of an old way of life occurred, necessitating Flemish workers to move from their

³⁷ Jan Dhondt and Marinette Bruwier, "The Industrial Revolution in the Low Countries 1700-1914" in Cipolla, ed., The Fontana Economic History of Europe, p. 330.

³⁸Kittell, "The Revolutionary Period," p. 126. Also note p. 122.

³⁹Ibid., p. 124.

rural environs to Flemish or Walloon urban and/or industrial areas. Hence, capitalism's "creative destruction" produced great technological progress in Belgium during this period⁽¹⁸²⁰⁻⁸⁰⁾, but at a high human cost.⁴⁰

Other factors combined to hurt Belgian trade in general at crucial periods during its industrialization. Belgium's severance from Napoleon's empire in 1815 hurt its industries badly, especially its textile industry, which permanently lost its leading sector position from this blow. Having had free access without tariffs to France's much larger domestic market had been a boom to Belgian industry. Its iron and coal industries had been a valuable part of Napoleon's war effort. Having come under the rule of Holland in 1815, and exploiting its colonial textile markets in Indonesia, it suddenly lost the latter during its war of independence, which again knocked much of its industry off its feet.⁴¹ The great Cockerill Seraing works was virtually closed by this war in 1831-32, producing only seven steam engines in 1831 and five in 1832, as against an average of 26/year for 1824-30.⁴² Besides the serious problems of adjusting to all these political transformations, British competition was another very serious threat, since Belgium was developing industries highly similar to that of the British Isles-- cotton, woolen, and linen textiles, coal, and iron production. Its textile industries were faced with the dilemma of "mechanize or die!" against British machine-made imports in its own home market, let alone in foreign markets.⁴³ Hence, the painful adjustment Kittell describes Belgium as going through in the 1830-80 period may well have been necessary to prevent an even greater economic collapse before British competition if it was not stopped from taking more and more market share away from Belgium's industries.

After the mid-nineteenth century, the Belgian workers' standard of living clearly improved. A pair of studies of working class families by the Belgian government, as reported in Alter, reflects this: In 1853 average family income was 840 francs for the 141 families studied, while by 1891, the average was

1,866 francs. While these figures are unadjusted for inflation, it should be

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 145-146.

⁴¹Milward and Saul, The Economic Development, pp. 439, 440, 445.

⁴²Mokyr, Industrialization, p. 59; Westebbe, "State Entrepreneurship," p. 223.

noted the latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of declining prices and gradual ^{deflation,} so it is no surprise to learn the Michotte price index for Belgium has the same value for both these years. Hence, these figures surely reflect a real increase in material well-being.⁴⁴

However, Strikwerda reports Belgian coal miners had their wages fall in the 1870s and 1880s due to British and German competition and the increased average costs of producing Belgian coal, causing mineowners to squeeze down on wages. A similar process for similar competitive reasons occurred in the Belgian iron and steel industry, in which a U.S. 1889 Department of Labor study revealed British bar iron wages varied on a scale from 101 to 68, German wages between 52 and 49, while the Belgian wages clustered around 44.⁴⁵ Hence, while average Belgian wages may have risen by 1891, they were still lower than what workers in other countries with similar jobs were being paid.

These low wages no doubt helped Belgium industrialize further through boosting profits and reinvestment in industry, which is Mokyr's general thesis for the earlier 1795-1850 period.⁴⁶ These low wages also continued a historic tendency for Belgium to pay lower wages in its protoindustries of earlier centuries, which had given it an edge on the international market even then.⁴⁷ Perhaps Belgium, being a pygmy caught between the giants of France, Britain, and a united Germany (earlier, a united Zollverein), and having only a relatively small, very undeveloped, lately acquired colonial empire for a guaranteed foreign market, felt the need to pay low wages to overcome tariff barriers in order to gain access to larger foreign markets.

Its own small domestic market simply has not been large enough to absorb its potentially relatively much greater industrial output, and while facing

⁴³Kittell, "The Revolutionary Period," p. 122; Mokyr, Industrialization, pp. 72, 115, 256-257.

⁴⁴Alter, "Work and Income in the Family Economy: Belgium, 1853 and 1891," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Autumn 1984, p. 261.

⁴⁵Strikwerda, "Interest-Group Politics," pp. 281-282.

⁴⁶Mokyr, "The Industrial Revolution," pp. 376-378; Mokyr, Industrialization, pp. 166-168.

⁴⁷Vandenbroeke, "The Regional Economy," pp. 164-165. See also Mokyr, Industrialization, pp. 51, 135.

the often ferocious competition of English, French, and German industry in its own market, resorted to organizing international cartels, creating special investment bank--heavy industry corporate relationships, paying lower wages, and employing the most recent productive innovations to stave off competition.⁴⁸

One of the most remarkable phenomena occurring as a result of this general rise in the standard of living was the general exit of women from the paid labor force, especially away from wage work done outside the home in favor of doing family-related domestic chores. For example, in the families studied by the Belgian government that are reported by Alter, 83.7% of mothers were employed in 1853, while only 11.2% were employed in 1891.⁴⁹ In 1890 in Antwerp and Liege for every 1,000 male workers there were respectively 233 and 261 women workers. On the other hand, when males worked at jobs that did not pay especially well, their wives were more apt to work. In Ghent, the center of Belgium's textile industry, which paid much lower wages than the metallurgical industry of Liege, there were 618 women working in the industry for every 1,000 men.⁵⁰ It appears, however, that how well the father of the family was paid was not the only variable, nor was the withdrawal of women from the workforce solely a product of Belgium's rising standard of living. The middle class ideal of having a homemaker wife and mother apparently drifted down from the middle class into the working class, with such a role for the wife becoming indeed a kind of status symbol.⁵¹ The interesting effect of all this was that child labor continued basically unabated during the latter part of the nineteenth century, which meant such families practiced the opposite ideal from many today in the industrialized west, in which the wife works, and the children do not. For instance, Alter reports that 88.7% of the children worked in 1853 in the families that the Belgian government studied, while 86.2% of them worked in 1891.⁵² Hence, the problems of the family life cycle were still very much present, in which the total income of a ^{young} married couple without children falls once they have children, but as they get older they are put to work earning their keep,

allowing the family's income to rise back up towards the old level. Today,

⁴⁸ Compare Strikwerda, "Interest-Group Politics," pp. 281-284.

⁴⁹ Alter, "Work and Income," p. 263.

the solution a young married couple with young pre-school children is to pack them off to day care, pre-school, or some relative, and have the wife and husband ^{both} work to make ends meet. However, with a rising standard of living in the late nineteenth century, family household decision-making based on ^{different} values resulted in the rather astonishingly ^{different} results: "In the decades around 1900, women were more completely occupied with domestic activities than they were before or have been since."⁵³

The industrial revolution in Belgium gave both ^{great} opportunities and serious problems for Belgian workers to confront. For those in certain industries, such as skilled trades in the metallurgical industry, it gave them the opportunity to live at a standard of living their great-grand-fathers would have thought either unimaginable or completely reckless financially. The masses for the first time began to rise above subsistence. But for those on the negative end of economic change, such as the domestic industry's linen spinners and weavers, they were forced to give up a time-honored, even ancient, way of life for the fearsomely different urban life of the factory worker, or else endure brutal cuts in pay ^{and incredibly long working hours while} competing against machinery while trying to eke out an existence based on the potato grown on their small plot of rented land. This was truly capitalism's "creative destruction" at work. How you fared depended upon where you were lucky or unlucky enough to start, and how you reacted to the changes, the risks, and the opportunities that the new environment the industrial revolution had thrust upon you as a worker which you had NOT asked for.

⁵⁰Patricia Van den Eeckhout, "Family Income of Ghent Working-Class Families ca. 1990," Journal of Family History, volume 18, number 2, 1993, p. 90.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 93, 109.

⁵²Alter, "Work and Income," p. 263.

⁵³Ibid., p. 256.