CHILD LABOR AND
THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The least understood and most widely misrepresented aspect of the history of capitalism is child labor. One cannot evaluate the phenomenon of child labor in England during the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, unless one realizes that the introduction of the factory system offered a livelihood, a means of survival, to tens of thousands of children who would not have lived to be youths in the pre-capitalistic era.

The factory system led to a rise in the general standard of living, to rapidly falling urban death rates and decreasing infant mortality—and produced an unprecedented population explosion.

In 1750, England’s population was six million; it was nine million in 1800 and twelve million in 1810, a rate of increase without precedent in any era. The age distribution of the population shifted enormously; the proportion of children and youths increased sharply. "The proportion of those born in London dying before five years of age" fell from 74.5 percent in 1750-49 to 31.8 percent in 1810-19.3

Children who אריא were born to die in infancy now had a chance for survival. Both the rising population and the rising life expectancy gave the lie to the claims of socialist and fascist critics of capitalism that the conditions of the laboring classes were progressively deteriorating during the Industrial Revolution.

One is both morally unjust and ignorant of history if one blames capitalism for the condition of children during the Industrial Revolution, since, in fact, capitalism brought an enormous improvement over their condition in the preceding age. The source of the injustice was ill-informed, emotional modernism and poets, like Dickens and Mrs. Browning; forlorn medievalists like Southey; political tract writers portraying as economic historians, like Engels and Marx. All of them plumed a vague, rosy picture of a bar "golden age" of the working classes, which allegedly, was destroyed by the Industrial Revolution. Historians have not supported their assertions. Investigation and common sense have dehumanized the pre-factory system of domestic industry. In that system, the weaver made a costly initial investment, paid heavy rentals, for a loom or itame, and bore most of the speculative risks involved. His diet was drab and meager, and even accidents often depended on whether work could be found for his wife and children. There was nothing romantic or enviable about a family living and working together in a badly lighted, improperly ventilated, and poorly constructed cottage.

How did children thrive before the Industrial Revolution? In 1697, John Locke wrote a report for the Board of Trade on the problem of poverty and poor-relief. Locke enunciated that a bowling man and his wife in good health could support no more than two children, and he recommended that all children over three years of age should be taught to earn their living at working schools for spinning and knitting, where they would be given food. "What they can have at home, from their parents," wrote Locke, "is seldom more than bread and water, and that very scantily too."

Professor Ludwig von Mises reminds us:

The factory owners did not have the power to compel anyone to take a factory job. They could only hire people who were ready to work for the wages offered to them. Low as these wages were, they were nonetheless much more than these poor people could earn in any other field open to them. It is a distortion of facts to say that the factories carried off the
housewives from the nurseries and the kitchen and the children from their play. These women had nothing to cook with and no food to feed their children. These children were destitute and starving. Their only refuge was the factory. It saved them, in the literal sense of the term, from death by starvation.

Factories were not allowed to work at the insistence of their parents. The children's hours of labor were very long, but the work was often quite easy — usually just attending a spinning or weaving machine and revolving through when they broke. It was not on behalf of such children that the agitation for factory legislation began. The first child labor law in England (1802) regulated the hours and conditions of labor of the miserable children who worked as chimney sweeps — a dirty, dangerous job which led to shortened lives. The Industrial Revolution, and which was not connected with factories. The first Act which applied to factory children was passed to protect those who had been sent to virtual slavery by the parish authorities, a government body: they were deserted or orphaned pauperc children who were legally under the custody of the poor-law officials in the parish, and who were bound by these officials into long terms of unpaid apprenticeship in return for a bare subsistence.

Conditions of employment and sanitation were acknowledged to have been best in the larger and newer factories. As successive Factory Acts, between 1816 and 1846, placed greater and greater restrictions on the employment of children and adolescents, the owners of the larger factories, which were more easily and frequently subject to inspection and scrutiny by the factory inspectors, increasingly chose to dismiss children from employment rather than be subjected to elaborate, arbitrary, and ever-changing regulations on how they might run a factory which employed children. The result of legislative interference was that these dismissed children, who needed to work in order to survive, were forced to seek jobs in smaller, older, and more out-of-the-way factories, where the conditions of employment, sanitation, and safety were markedly inferior. Those who could not find new jobs were reduced to the status of their counterparts a hundred years before; that is, to irregular agricultural labor, or worse — in the words of Professor von Mises — by "forfeit the country as vagabonds, beggars, thieves, robbers and prostitutes."

Child labor was not ended by legislative fiat; child labor ended.
when it became economically unnecessary for children to earn wages in order to survive — when the income of their parents became sufficient to support them. The emancipators and benefactors of these children were not legislators or factory inspectors, but manufacturers and financiers. Their efforts and investments in machinery led to a rise in real wages, to a growing abundance of goods at lower prices, and to an incomparable improvement in the general standard of living.

The proper answer to the critics of the Industrial Revolution is given by Professor T. S. Ashton:

There are today 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 roll 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.3

Let me add that the Industrial Revolution and its consequent prosperity were the achievement of capitalism and cannot be achieved under any other politico-economic system. As proof, I offer you the spectacle of Soviet Russia which combines industrialization and famine.

WOMEN AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

To condemn capitalism one must first misrepresent its history. The notion that industrial capitalism led to nothing but misery and degradation for women is an article of faith among critics of capitalism. It is as prevalent as the view that children were victimized and exploited by the Industrial Revolution — and it is as false.

Let us examine the source of this view. To appreciate the benefits that capitalism brought to women, one must compare their status under capitalism with their condition in the preceding centuries. But the sixteenth-century critics of capitalism did not do this; instead, they distorted and falsified history, glorifying the past and disparaging everything modern by contrast.

For instance, Richard Custler, one of the most famous nineteenth-century enemies of capitalism, claimed that everyone was better off spiritually and morally in the Middle Ages than in the early nineteenth century. Describing medieval England, Custler speculated about the last golden age: "Oh, what a beautiful ship was England once! She was well built, well manned, well provisioned, well rigged! All were then merry, cheerful and happy on board!"

This was said of centuries in which "the bulk of the population were peasants in a servile condition, bound by status, not free to change their mode of life or to move from their birthplace" — when people had only the promise of happiness in the life beyond the grave to secure them against decaying plagues, recurring famines and at best half-filled stomachs — when people lived in homes so infested with dirt and vermin that one historian's verdict about these corvées is: "From a health point of view the only thing to be said in their favor was that they brought down very early." 4

Custler represented the viewpoint of the medievalists. The socialists, who agreed with them, were equally unambiguous historians.

For example, describing the conditions of the workers in the pre-industrial seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Friedrich Engels alleged: "The workers vegetated throughout a passage of comfortable existence, leading a righteous and peaceful life in all piety and probity, and their material position was far better off than their successors." 5

This was written of an age characterized by staggeringly high mortality rates, especially among children — crowded towns and villages untouched by sanitation — notoriously high gin consumption. The working-class diet consisted mainly of oatmeal, milk, cheese, and beer; while bread, potatoes, coffee, tea, sugar, and meat were still expensive luxuries. Bathing was infrequent and laundry a rarity because soap was so costly, and clothing — which had to last a decade or generation — would not last if washed too often.

The most rapid changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution was the shifting of textile production out of the home and into the factory. Under the previous system, called "domestic industry," the spinning and weaving were done in the worker's own home with the aid of his wife and children. When technological advances caused the shifting of textile production into factories, this led, said and

4 Bent, p. 114.
5 Ibid., p. 88.
critic of capitalism, "to the breakup of the home as a social unit."

Mrs. Neff writes approvingly that "under the system of domestic industry the parents and the children had worked together, the father the autocratic head, pocketing the family earnings and directing their expenditure." Her tone turns to condemnation when she re-

counts: "not under the factory system the members of the family all had their own earnings, they worked in separate departments of the mill, coming home only for food and sleep. The home was little but a shelter."

The factories were held responsible, by such critics, for every social problem of that age, including promiscuity, idleness, and prostitution. Implicit in the condemnation of women working in the factories was the notion that a woman's place is in the home and that her only proper role is to keep house for her husband and rear his children. The factories were blamed simultaneously for removing girls from the watchful restraints of their parents and for encouraging early marriage; and later, for fostering maternal negligence and incompetent housekeeping, as well as for encouraging lack of female subordination and the desire for luxuries.

It is a damning indictment of the pre-factory system to consider what kind of "dainties" the Industrial Revolution brought within reach of the working-class lodgers. Women sought such luxuries as teats instead of chugs, hats instead of shawls, "delicacies" (like coffee, tea, and sugar) instead of "plain food."

Critics denounced the increasing habit of wearing ready-made clothes, and they viewed the replacement of wools and linens by inexpensive cottons as a sign of growing poverty. Women were con-
demned for not making by hand that which they could buy more cheaply, thanks to the revolution in textile production. Dresses no longer had to last a decade — women no longer had to wear coarse petticoats until they disintegrated from dirt and age; cheap cotton dresses and undergarments were a revolution in personal hygiene.

The two most prevalent nineteenth-century explanations of why women worked in the factories were: (a) that their "husbands preferred to remain home idle, supported by their wives," and (b) that the factory system "displaced adult men and supplied on women the cheap and burdens of supporting their husbands and families." These charges are examined in Work and Motives by Victorian Industry.

a definitive study by Dr. Margaret Hewitt of the University of Exeter. Her conclusion is: “Neither of these assumptions proves to have any statistical foundation whatsoever.”  

In fact, women worked in the factories for far more conventional reasons. Dr. Hewitt enumerates them: many women worked because “their husbands’ wages were insufficient to keep the home going”; others were widowed or deserted; others were bored, or had grown-up children; some had husbands who were unemployed, or employed in seasonal jobs; and a few chose to work in order to earn money for extra comforts in the home, although their husbands’ wages were sufficient to cover necessities. 

What the factory system offered these women was— not misery and degradation—but a means of survival, of economic independence, of rising above the barest subsistence. Harsh as eighteenth-century factory conditions were, compared to twentieth-century conditions, women increasingly preferred work in the factories to any other alternatives open to them, such as domestic service, or back-breaking work in agricultural gangs, or working as harvesters and pullers in the mines; moreover, if a woman could support herself, she was not driven into early marriage. 

Even Professor Trevelyan, who persistently disparaged the factories and extolled “the good old days,” admitted: 

... the women who went to work in the factories though they lost some of the best things in life [Trevelyan does not explain what he means], gained independence. ... The money they earned was their own. The factory hand acquired an economic position personal to herself, which in the course of time other women came to envy. 

And Trevelyan concluded: “The working class home often became more comfortable, quiet and sanitary by ceasing to be a miniature factory.” 

Critics of the factory system still try to argue that the domestic spinners or weavers could have had the “creator’s pride” in their work, which they lost by becoming mere cogs in a huge industrial machine. Dr. Dorothy Geary firmly demolishes this thesis: “It seems
unlikely that the average weaver, toiling hour after hour throwing the shuttle backwards and forwards on work which was monotonous and exhausting, had the reactions which would satisfy a modern enthusiast for peasant arts."

Finally, it was charged that factory work made women too conscious with material comforts at the expense of spiritual considerations.

The misery in which women lived before capitalism might have made them cherish the New Testament injunction: "Love not the world, nor the things that are in the world!" But the productive splendor of capitalism vanquished that view. Today, the foremost champions of that viewpoint are Professor Gillbrich and the austere preachers behind the Iron Curtain.