

Matthew Thorne
King's College Taunton
September 13, 17

Why was Child Labour a Problem for 19th Century Societies?

“Child labour and poverty are inevitably bound together, and if you continue to use the labour of children as the treatment for the social disease of poverty, you will have both poverty and child labour to the end of time”¹. It is this point that epitomises why child labour was a problem for 19th century societies. Economically, it resulted in heightened wealth inequality, slow adult wage growth, and unsustainable GDP growth. Socially, its use produced dire working conditions, lengthening working hours, and increasing the severity of domestic tensions, leading to lower immaterial standards of living. Also morally, the implementation of child labour caused serious deformities amongst physically developing workers, resulted in the further separation of workers from the value of their labour, and created a society ruled by the “dark, satanic mills”, much frowned upon in the eyes of holy establishments. Given the extensive research into the subject of child labour, the focus of this essay will be mainly on why child labour was a problem during the British industrial revolution, with mention to activity in France and Prussia. This is also the case because of the increased frequency of workers’ autobiographies during this period in Britain, as opposed to other industrialising nations, which can be used to illustrate the issues that arose from the prominence of child labour in rapidly changing societies.

Common debate on the successes and failures of child labour has been characterised as the battle between the ‘optimists’ and the ‘pessimists’, the optimists defending the period of rapid economic growth through Smithian capitalism, and the pessimists arguing that the 19th century

¹ Abbott, Grace. International Labour Organisation Convention 182, 1999.

saw decreased living standards for the working classes, in exchange for this rapid economic growth, with child labour being a major cause. Another key area of debate has been about the extent and consequences of child labour, including the changes in social commentary witnessed towards the end of the industrialisation period, with ‘optimists’ proposing that the widespread employment of under 16s in 18th century agriculture meant child labour was already present before the factory era of employment, suggesting that any problems would already be present and thus not the fault of new innovations into factory technology and the jobs that came with them.

Influential commenters on this debate include Clark Nardinelli, Jane Humphries, E.P Thompson, and Carolyn Tuttle, with Nardinelli being the main proponent for the ‘optimists’ in recent decades. Nardinelli argued that families had the choice in the 19th century whether to send their children to work, and the fact that they did proves that the role of child labour in the industrial revolution was economically optimal². However, this view has attracted much opposition (Galbi, 1997; Tuttle, 1998; Humphries, 1999), for example, Humphries suggests that child labour led to the depression of adult wages³, and that the choices Nardinelli spoke about weren’t made in a vacuum, they depended on factors like educational and job opportunities. Thompson further suggests that child labour vastly increased in scale within families, leading to domestic tensions and a fall in the standard of living of children outside factories as well as inside⁴.

The basis of many inquiries into the effects of child labour in the 19th century have stemmed from autobiographical accounts: Humphries’ 2010 work was based upon around 600, Emma

²Nardinelli, Clark. *Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990

³ Humphries, Jane. *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, p27-36

⁴ Ibid, p367

Griffin's 'A Peoples' History of the Industrial Revolution' (2013) uses hundreds of accounts to paint a picture of harsh social conditions in the period, and nearly every work on the subject cites autobiographical evidence at some point. However, there are limits to the validity and usefulness of these recollections, autobiographies can never tell the whole story of life in a period of history, firstly because they are only ever written with a motive. Accounts are not written without a point of interest, and therefore they neglect averages in the standard of living, about which there is nothing of note to write about. Autobiographies also often give little reliable information, and those that do exist from the industrialisation era in Britain are concentrated towards the latter period⁵. The first set of reliable British census data only became available from 1851 onwards, so can not reliably show trends for the entirety of the 19th century either.

Child labour represented a significant proportion of the British workforce during the 19th century, particularly in the earlier stages, and as a result contributed heavily to Britain's rapid economic growth. With such economic growth, it is expected that there would be a vast increase in standard of living. This unfortunately can not be measured through happiness, so we must settle, as economic historians have done, for real GDP per capita. According to estimates by the economist N. F. R. Crafts, British income per person (in 1970 U.S. dollars) rose from \$430 in 1800, to \$500 in 1830, and then jumped to \$800 in 1860⁶, nearly doubling in the period of British history where child labour was most prevalent: by 1851, children and youth made up

⁵ Kirby, Peter. *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003

⁶<http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/IndustrialRevolutionandtheStandardofLiving.html> as of 15.02.2016

30% of miners, even after the Mining Act of 1842. The apparently positive rise in living standards does not signify that the impact of child labour was positive to society though. This is because, while real GDP per capita doubled, real GDP itself grew fourfold⁷, showing a rise in income inequality throughout the period. Income and property tax data also suggests “unambiguously” that income inequality rose sharply between 1820 and 1860, after which it levelled until the first world war⁸, aligning with the sharp increase in child employment in industrial occupations in the early decades of the 1800s, and the steady decline towards the end of the century. The principal reason why wages did not grow as fast as the country was that unskilled children pushed adults out of jobs by providing cheaper labour, leading to unemployment, and longer working hours for those who did keep their now lower paying jobs.

In theory, apprenticeships seemed to show an answer to creating skilled, productive labour, while still utilising what children had to offer, however in the real world, they just compounded the issue of child labour in the 19th century. Employers were often inefficient and uninterested in the way they trained apprenticeships, which rather diminished the supposed effects of their use⁹. Aside from this, apprenticeships did little to improve the working conditions of child labourers, something that would be expected given the higher value they would now bring to an employer through being more skilled. In 1802, Sir Robert Peel introduced the ‘Act for the preservation of the health and morals of apprentices’, which limited the working day of an apprentice to 12 hours and required that they be instructed for at least some of each day in the first 4 years of training. The result of this law was a decrease in the number of apprentices in

⁷ Broadberry, Steven et al. British Economic Growth 1270-1870, figure 11. (Paper for seminar, 2011)

⁸ Williamson, 1980, in The Journal of Economic History, Volume 40 No3, p460-61

⁹ Humphries, Jane. Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution. Cambridge University Press, 2010

the following years, showing that employers were uninterested in training apprentices beforehand, and were really just seeking free labour. In comment of the decline, R.M Muggeridge stated that “[he found] nothing in the apprentices condition to lead [him] to regret that the practice [had] so much diminished”¹⁰, referring to the poor social conditions of young labourers.

The social conditions of child labourers are most commonly associated with the partially stylised literary cases in the works of Victorian writers, Dickens being the most prominent example. It is true that “there may be a little mileage to be gained in claiming that novelists, poets, and campaigners were not particularly informed or impartial witnesses: but this line of argument will not go very far in silencing their message”¹¹. The Hammonds, in *the Town Labourer*, highlighted the exploitation of child labour in cotton mills and coal mines, while being met with the counterattacks from the optimists, who argued that children had always been involved in labour. The difference however between child work in the 19th century than in the 18th century is that work was nearly entirely contained within the family in the 1700s, meaning that not only could the children’s parents control hours of work, but they could choose the tasks undertaken. Whereas, following the outbreak of the industrial revolution:

¹⁰ Muggeridge, R.M. Westminster Review Vol 26. 1836, p175

¹¹ Griffin, Emma. Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the Industrial Revolution. Yale University Press, 2013 p57

“Many thousands of these hapless creatures were sent down into the north [...] from the age of seven. There is abundant evidence on record [...] to show that, in many of the manufacturing districts, cruelties most heart-rending were practised upon the unoffending and friendless creatures who were thus consigned to the charge of master manufacturers”¹²

Being a report written for government in 1833, with the view of pushing through reform, it can not be said that this source is without exaggeration, although, the poor conditions of child factory workers were regarded as one of the main reasons that child labour was a problem in the 19th century. Friedrich Engels, the son of a mill owner himself, observed the horrific illnesses that plagued the child worker, including chest infections from excessive breathing of dust, resulting in the coughing up of blood, and the deformation of the right shoulder-blade, a commonality amongst child flax-spinners¹³; the work of children therefore stunted development, and caused suffering that would either last a lifetime, or those who could not handle the pain took it upon themselves to end it.

The investigation into the ‘condition and treatment of children employed in the mines and collieries’, headed by Lord Shaftesbury, includes thousands of pages of oral testimony, from children as young as five, as to the dismal working environments of children, and so shocked the House of Commons that a bill to prevent all women and children working underground in the mines, and to establish mine inspections, was passed without division, becoming law just two months after the report’s publication. This opened the door for other key reforms, such as the Ten Hour Act in 1847, showing that the acceptance of child labour hitherto had limited social

¹² First Report of the Central Board of His Majesty’s Commissioners as to the Employment of Children in Factories, 1833. Westminster Review Vol 26, 1836 p175-6

¹³ Engels, Friedrich. The Condition of the English Working Class. 1844, p164.

progress, and that Shaftesbury's reforms were vital in securing a more humanitarian society. Humanitarian sentiment could also be observed in France during the second quarter of the 19th century¹⁴, however, with France being less industrially developed than Britain in the 19th century, it was only a small group of industrialists in the town of Mulhouse that initially pushed for child labour reform. This was particularly telling of the perils of child employment though, because these main opponents of its use were traditionally also proponents of 'Laissez Faire' approaches to government, seeming to support the evangelical view in Britain of "intolerability" in terms of child labour conditions.

Furthermore, Prussia broke its allegiance to Adam Smith and the free market economy to impose a child labour law in 1839, forbidding the employment of under nines in factories, and limiting the working day of under 16s to 10 hours, while outlawing night and Sunday shifts for youths. The reform is more extensive than that seen in Britain 6 years previously, largely because of Prussian groups of bourgeois civil servants, who examined school attendance and literacy in the 1820s and 1830s and became increasingly concerned with that child labour was preventing the Prussian government from fulfilling its role to educate the younger generations¹⁵. While in work, children only received about an hour of instruction a week and many remained illiterate as a consequence.

Aside from the educational deficiencies and physical consequences of children being in labour, the degradation of domestic relations was another unfortunate product of the employment of children, driving the opinions of working children that, due to social preconceptions, fathers were to blame for their misery. A statement in George Mockford's autobiography outlines this

¹⁴ Weissbach, Lee. *Child Labour Legislation in Nineteenth Century France*. 1977.

¹⁵ Kastner, Dieter. *Child Labour in the Rhineland*. Stuttgart: SH Verlag, 2004

perfectly, suggesting that “the great ambition of [his] father was to save money [and] his children’s little strength and time should be all put to such an account to be conducive to this end”¹⁶. Some accounts “depicted dependant mothers as burdensome”¹⁷ too, an anonymous chimney boy from 1834 described his mother as “a very helpless woman” for example (Anon 1901, p19), but in the majority of cases recollections have been sparing towards mothers and have recognised their efforts, despite being less than fruitful in many cases. This tendency stems from popular social opinion in the 19th century that women were physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere¹⁸. Peter Gaskell noted in 1833 that worker discontents commonly arose less from simple wage issues in the 1800s than from “the separation of families [and the] breaking up of households”, showing that child labour was harming domestic relations.

Different factions of Christianity harboured varying views on child labour, but of these the most controversial were the Methodists, who took on the objective of acting as the apologists for child labour rather than being a key body in pushing for its reformation¹⁹. In taking on this position, the Methodist church managed to be simultaneously the religion of the industrial bourgeoisie as well as of wide sections of the proletariat, in effect, performing a double service. This situation was deplored by John Wesley, a co-founder of methodism and a Christian evangelist, who preached that:

¹⁶Griffin, Emma. *Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the Industrial Revolution*. Yale University Press, 2013 p61

¹⁷ Humphries, Jane. *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, p114

¹⁸<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century> as of 25.02.2016

¹⁹ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Victor Gollancz, 1963. Re-published, Penguin Books, 2013 p383

“Religion must necessarily be the produce of both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love for the world... The Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionately increase in pride [and] anger... so although the religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.”

The Methodist church therefore acknowledged the moral implications of child labour, in so much that the conditions suffered produced riches and thus induced pride and anger, yet in its success in appealing to varying social classes chose not to be proactive about reform.

Evangelical Protestants on the other hand, such as Richard Oastler and Lord Shaftesbury, were outraged by the “dark, satanic mills”, where girls often worked naked to the waist alongside fully naked men²⁰. They set about campaigning for radical reform of industry to eliminate the exploitation of children, since they believed in the theory of “intolerability”, that conditions had become so ghastly that ‘humane’ men were forced to act²¹. In justification for the evangelical movement being separate from the Anglican church, Shaftesbury, who would usually be sparing towards the church in question, states that “with the exception of Bull, the Anglican church as a body... will do nothing [to help end child labour]”.

As the amount of child labourers increased in the early decades of the 19th century, reaching 20% of the workforce under the age of 20 by 1821²², Britain and other industrialising societies were limiting the level of potential food production that could be achieved in the future, given that the younger generations were deprived of education when in work. Thomas Malthus, an

²⁰<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-53/child-labor-white-slavery.html> as of 09.03.16

²¹ Midwinter, E.C. Victorian Social Reform. Longman Group Ltd 1968, p19

²²http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle_democracy/childlabour.html as of 10.03.16

English cleric, vocally advocated child labour for exactly this debilitating effect. He believed that “moral constraints” should be put on society and the economy, stating that “Population, when unchecked, increases at a geometric ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison with the second”²³, with his solution being to implement ‘preventative’ and ‘positive’ checks on the population. ‘Preventative’ checks included the widespread use of contraceptive or a vow of celibacy, which he argued to be of more use in the upper classes, while ‘positive’ checks involved the “actual distresses of some of the lower classes, by which they are disabled from giving the proper food and attention to their children”²⁴, suggesting that child labour, by lowering adult wages and decreasing relative standards of living allowed for the population to be controlled.

Due to the lack of regulation surrounding child labour before the Factory acts of 1847, then not significantly again until the education acts of 1870 and 1880, and the further factory acts of the 1890s, there were increased incentives for business owners to employ children, given that their wages were five times lower than adults²⁵. Businesses were therefore also encouraged to further specialise the production process to facilitate these child labourers; children didn’t have the mental capacity or the education to learn complex production tasks, so the increased division of labour was necessary to fully utilise their productive potentials. This brought about the problem, expressed by Karl Marx in 1844, of ‘estranged labour’, or in other words, the alienation of the workforce. He argued that in 19th century Europe, “labour [was] external to the worker,

²³ Malthus, Thomas. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/report-on-child-labour-1842> as of 08.03.16

i.e., that it [did] not belong to his nature, that therefore he [did] not realise himself in his work”²⁶, concluding that as a result of diversifying the production process, an action contributed to heavily by child labour, workers in the 19th century were not living fully; they toiled at work for no end product. An idea which culminated in Marx’s famous rallying cry: “workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains”.

From the modern perspective, 19th century child labour conditions, and the suffering associated with its toleration are unquestionably immoral, as ratified by the religious bodies (despite their range of interventions), however, this show of commonly accepted humanitarianism comes as a result of the “awakening of social conscience”²⁷ experienced during the industrial revolution. Previously, in the 18th century, child labour was accepted as a means of subsistence because households had control over the welfare of their own children and the hours and conditions they worked in. The new and more intense form of child labour experienced in 19th century societies led to the “increasing awareness of facts which had passed unnoticed... economic suffering both became more conspicuous and seemed less justified, because general wealth was increasing faster than ever before”; increases in GDP per capita, despite being less than it potentially could have been, meant that people began to question the reasons behind subjecting minors to dire standards of living, especially in a time when Britain was experiencing such economic prosperity.

²⁶ Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. 1844, first published in 1932, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

²⁷Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Victor Gollancz, 1963. Re-published, Penguin Books, 2013 p374

The humanitarian movement embodies exactly why child labour was a problem for 19th century societies: poor standards of living didn't match up to the economic growth of industrialising nations, and people were suffering lower wages, social discontents, and mass exploitation. It has even been shown that economic prosperity was maintained after the regulation of child labour. Following the Factory and Workshop acts of 1891 and 1895, Britain actually saw some of the highest levels of economic growth from across the century²⁸, while also experiencing rising real wages in the same period.

In conclusion, it is clear to see why child labour was such a serious problem for 19th century societies. The unregulated impacts of child labour on adult wages and therefore the ability of heads of family to provide for their dependants brought damaging effects to material and immaterial standards of living, leading to unimaginable levels of poverty within societies. Increasing wealth inequality, as a consequence of child labour, furthered the masses from affluence, while the divisions in labour activity separated people from the fruits of their work, resulting in reduced happiness in the eyes of many political and social commentators - like Engels and Shaftesbury. Furthermore, the family displeasures that occurred as a result of increased working hours created a society of miserable home lives, as well as dismal levels of human fulfilment in the workplace. It is fortunate then that the end of the 19th century saw significant steps towards reforming the troubles produced by the uncontrolled toleration of child labour, through the factory acts of the 1890s building upon early 19th century factory reforms of the evangelicals, and the education acts of 1870 and 1880, which allowed for the fulfilment of childhoods and the education of younger generations.

Word Count (excluding footnotes): 3269

²⁸ <https://literarytaste.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/screen-shot-2013-03-18-at-11-55-28-am.png> as of 02.03.16

Bibliography:

- Abbott, Grace. International Labour Organisation Convention 182, 1999
- Nardinelli, Clark. Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990
- Humphries, Jane. Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution. Cambridge University Press, 2010
- Thompson, E.P. The Making of the English Working Class. Victor Gollancz, 1963. Re-published, Penguin Books, 2013
- Kirby, Peter. Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003
- Broadberry, Steven et al. British Economic Growth 1270-1870, figure 11. (Paper for seminar, 2011) Williamson, The Journal of Economic History, Volume 40 No3, 1980, p460-61
- Muggeridge, R.M. Westminster Review Vol 26. 1836, p175
- Griffin, Emma. Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution. Yale University Press, 2013
- First Report of the Central Board of His Majesty's Commissioners as to the Employment of Children in Factories, 1833. Westminster Review Vol 26, 1836 p175-6
- Engels, Friedrich. The Condition of the English Working Class. 1844
- Weissbach, Lee. Child Labour Legislation in Nineteenth Century France. 1977
- Kastner, Dieter. Child Labour in the Rhineland. Stuttgart: SH Verlag, 2004
- Midwinter, E.C. Victorian Social Reform. Longman Group Ltd 1968
- Malthus, Thomas. An Essay on the Principle of Population, 1798
- Marx, Karl. Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. 1844, first published in 1932, Progress Publishers, Moscow

Webography:

- <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/IndustrialRevolutionandtheStandardofLiving.html> as of 15.02.2016
- <http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century> as of 25.02.2016
- <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-53/child-labor-white-slavery.html> as of 09.03.16
- http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle_democracy/childlabour.html as of 10.03.16

- <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/report-on-child-labour-1842> as of 08.03.16
- <https://literarytaste.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/screen-shot-2013-03-18-at-11-55-28-am.png> as of 02.03.16