

The factory system was a mixed blessing, if blessing it was. There is no question but that a great increase in production took place with this innovation. Goods poured forth from it in such quantity that people from every walk of life were able to have more and better clothes. Financially, too, the factory system was a great success; it was the foundation of increasing prosperity in England, and before long in other lands of the West.

The Dark Side

There was, however, a nether side to this development. It was in the character of work life in the textile factories. Much has been written about the harshness of conditions in these early factories, of small children chained to machines working from dawn to dusk, of pallid and pinched faces rarely touched by the sun, of girls for whom the flower of youth was nipped in the bud by unremitting toil, of bodies warped and bent to the shapes required for tending the machines.

Whatever of exaggeration there may be in particular accounts, the picture that generally emerges must be substantially accurate. The making of yarn and cloth had traditionally been work mainly for women and children. The nimble fingers of children were right for the tasks, and the attendance to detail and patience most highly developed

in women was an asset. The employment of children, and particularly girls, made the factory system especially unpleasant for later generations to accept.

What I would focus on in the context of this work, however, was the loss of independence and the management of one's own work affairs in the factory system. Work in these factories entailed some of the worst features of organization. The factory owners or managers prescribed the time for workers to come to work, how long they would work, what tasks they were to perform, and how the work was to be done. In the early stages of the factory system, control was often not restricted to the work life; it was extended over the whole life of the workers. Villages were built around the factories, and workers might be required to live in and pay rent upon the houses so provided. These villages often had a company store in which the scrip in which they could be paid might be spent. Often enough there were company police, augmented by spies who kept the managers informed about the behavior of the workers.

A Counter-Movement

In significant ways, the factory system ran counter to the great liberating movement which had been going on in England and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere. In agriculture, great headway was being made

in separating ownership of property from control over people. Serfdom, which tied the peasant to the soil and made service to the owner obligatory, had been abolished. Before long, indeed, serfdom and slavery would be abolished in all lands where Western and Christian influence was strong. New arrangements had been devised for farming land which left the tenant increasingly on his own to manage his own work affairs; the only thing he owed the landlord was a portion of the product.

Even so, the factory system was in many ways the product of a particular historical setting. The initial inventions for textile manufacturing were made at a time when falling water was the only considerable non-animal power system available. Thus, places for housing the machines had to be built adjacent to the water supply and the machines had to be concentrated near the master wheel. Also, the principle of separating the ownership of property from control over people was incompletely realized. Servants and farm workers were hired for wages. Indentured servitude was still common. It was a widespread practice for fathers to hire out their children or sell them into indentured servitude. Given the attitudes of the time about the subordination of women and children to men, it would have been odd if the factory

masters had done other than assert control over them.

Be that as it may, the great productivity of the factory system should be attributed primarily to the use of machines and power from falling water or, in time, steam engines (i.e., to capital). It is doubtful that the increase in productivity should be attributed either to the greater industriousness of workers or to an organization which regimented and controlled the workers. Any organizational drag, however, was much more than offset by the advantage of using large machines harnessed to a non-animal power source.

The Use of Machines

The crucial role of capital can be demonstrated by a simple machine such as the early cotton gin. Eli Whitney's gin turned by one man could separate as much lint from the seed as could twenty-five men working with their hands. To put it another way, the most skilled and industrious person could get, say, three pounds of lint in a day. Whereas, an equally industrious person could get seventy-five pounds, say, by using a machine. The machine, in this case, would be the only difference. The principle remains basically the same for all constructive effort, though complexities cause difficulties both in perceiving and applying it.