

Landlordism key to a revolution

● Richard Giles, *Technology, Employment and the Industrial Revolution*, Sydney: William Books.



● Roy Douglas

THE MAIN reason for studying history (apart from pure fun) is the hope that it will provide useful lessons to guide behaviour in the future.

The so-called "Industrial Revolution" in Britain during the late 18th and early 19th centuries has been very widely studied for just that reason. People have argued, and continue to argue, about it – very largely because they hope to derive political and economic lessons applicable to our own time.

The salient facts are well known. The succession of inventions, the main political and economic events of the period, many of the vital demographic data, are clearly recorded. What is much more dubious, and really much more exciting, is what underlay these facts.

Why did the "Industrial Revolution" occur when and where it did? What effect did it have on the living standards of the people? How far did economic events influence political events, and *vice versa*?

The interplay of natural science, engineering, agriculture, demography, politics, the arts – and even the weather – during the period was certainly very complex, and forms a fascinating study in its own right. *Technology, Employment and the Industrial Revolution* is a short, lucidly written and stimulating work by Richard Giles.

The author constantly hammers – and rightly so – at the various views which have been propounded from time to time on such matters, and seems to find them all in various degrees inadequate.

His final conclusion is the same as the one reached by Mantoux nearly 20 years ago: The Industrial Revolution's "economic consequences strengthened ideas of laissez-faire but its social consequences strengthened ideas of government intervention".

As a statement of fact, this is probably correct. Yet does this paradox really say all that should be said on the matter? The implication seems to be that we must either let things rip and take the consequences

By Roy Douglas

in human misery, or regulate things and take the consequences in stagnation.

Perhaps quite a lot of people active in politics today on very different sides would be pleased that matters should be seen in that way, but it really isn't good enough to leave things like that.

Like a lot of historical writers, Richard Giles comes close to the real point, and then shies away from it. Very broadly, he seems to consider that living standards of the mass of the people were rising in a rather intermittent way; but that the disparity between the wealthiest and the poorest was also growing. This is very likely true; but why did it happen?

'Disreputable practices drove out good ones'

There are hints in the book, but no very clear answer. What was the *mechanism* by which the wealthy distanced themselves from the poor? Was it merely the natural operation of market forces which, left to themselves, *had* to work in that way?

I THINK not. The Poor Law Report of 1834, which he quotes, declares that "We can do little or nothing to prevent pauperism; the farmers will have it; they prefer that the labourers should be slaves; they object to their having gardens".

So, Richard Giles tells us, "Without allotments and rights of common the labourer could not choose between working for others and working for himself. He had lost his bargaining position".

Exactly so. The agricultural labourer was pauperised because the enclosures had left him landless. Thus he could not produce food for himself

and his family, and was dependent on the farmer for employment. There were a great many landless men in competition for jobs, and so wages were low.

But the agricultural labourer was not the only victim of landlessness. The industrial worker was pauperised as well. He lacked access to land for the food and fuel that he required; he also lacked access to land for the things he required for production. The miner had no share in the coal seams, which he could only work if some landowners kindly authorised him to do so. The ironworker had no legal title to the iron ore which lay under somebody else's land.

The trouble was not capitalism – the fact that capitalists owned mining machinery or blast furnaces. The trouble was landlordism – the fact that labour could not freely exert itself on land, which is the ultimate source of all wealth.

Of course there were capitalists who behaved abominably towards their workers. Of course a sort of Gresham's Law operated, by which disreputable industrial practices drove out good ones. It was natural enough for the industrial worker to blame the capitalist who was the proximate cause of his misery, just as it was natural for the agricultural worker to blame the tenant farmer who was the proximate cause of his misery.

Yet the behaviour of the capitalist employer and of the tenant farmer were consequences, not causes. Why was the capitalist or farmer able to obtain labour at starvation wages? Not because of economic freedom, not because of the private ownership of capital, but because somebody had excluded labour from access to land. If labour had had that access, there would have been no way of getting workers save by offering them conditions more attractive than those which they had previously enjoyed.

THERE WERE other complications to the story. Some trades –

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'Support' system fallacies

THIS BOOK is rewarding for all who have an interest in agricultural policy. Richard Howarth has exposed, with compelling statistical evidence, the fallacies of the present 'support' system for farming in the European Community.

He has confirmed that all the money which has been poured into agriculture in the past 30 years has not been of much benefit to working farmers. The major beneficiaries have been land owners because the grants and subsidies have become capitalised into land prices and rents.

According to Richard Howarth, the reason why farm incomes have failed to match those in other comparable occupations is that farmers are prepared to exist on low incomes because of the non-pecuniary advantages of farm life. This results in more farmers sharing the total agricultural income.

The logical conclusion of this analysis is that if there were fewer farmers, those remaining would be better off. But this does not square with his clear demonstration that agricultural monetary 'support' quickly becomes capitalised into land prices.

Surely the landowners would con-

D. W. PICKARD finds food for thought in *Farming for Farmers?* by Richard Howarth

tinue to claim the surplus income derived from grants and subsidies, however small the number of farmers?

In fact, since 1972 there has been a decrease in net farm incomes despite a considerable reduction in the number of full time farmers, and this was accompanied by a dramatic rise in the price of land.

	Number of Full-Time Farmers (000)	Real Net Farm Income per Farmer (£)	Land Prices (£/acre)
1972	229	594	555
	229	770	800
	214	598	682
	212	618	584
	219	648	796
	212	599	1013
	216	523	1365
	215	423	1831
	208	341	1907
	204	387	1831
	203	512	1901
1983	201	423	2197

Richard Howarth has a clear appreciation that politics is perhaps more important than economics in agriculture, and in his chapter on the Politics of Agriculture, he has assessed the power of the agricultural vote. He comes to the conclusion that the Conservative Party has little to lose by trying to reform agricultural policy, Labour has no justification for giving special treatment to farmers and only the Liberals would be seriously affected by trying to liberalise farming.

Part of Richard Howarth's solution is the phasing out of agricultural 'support'. In this he is correct; but without thorough reform of a taxation system which encourages investment in land and discriminates against the wage-earner, the 'farm problem' will always remain. Site value rating is the only way of ensuring that those who do the work derive the benefits in farming rather than those who own the land.

EXPLOITATION THAT DENIED WORKERS

handloom weaving for example – were destroyed by technological change. That sort of thing has always been going on.

The price of any kind of improvement of production in any kind of society – primitive or feudal, capitalist or socialist – is that some people will find that the jobs for which they have been trained will fold up under them. This is hard on the people concerned, but there is no remedy except to block all improvements.

What was much harder on them; what rendered them destitute and desperate in the days of Luddite riots; was the fact that they had no alternative means of livelihood. The reason for that? Perhaps you have already guessed.

So we return to the general point.

Yes, on the whole, industrialism probably improved living standards all round. Yes, the poorer classes were robbed and exploited mercilessly. The remedies which the victims tended to seek were palliatives, not cures.

Everything from Factory Acts and parliamentary democracy to trade unionism and bloody revolution may or may not have been of some advantage, but none of them could get to the roots of the trouble.

Then, as in all societies of which we have historical record, the most fundamental mechanism of exploitation lay in denying labour free access to land.

Whatever you do to landlords or

capitalists – even if you treat them as brutally as the Russian revolutionaries did after 1917 – you won't destroy exploitation and social injustice unless you give labour its free access to land. The victims of Stalin's tyranny saw that fact all too clearly.

Nobody would suggest that a good land system would have enabled people to come through the "Industrial Revolution" without some troubles and dislocations; but what is quite clear is that a great many ills and afflictions which arose during that period which at first sight had nothing to do with land did really spring from the tenurial system.

Unless and until that system is fundamentally remedied, avoidable miseries will go on arising in any kind of society.