The Industrial Revolution and Quality of Life

Since the Industrial Revolution began approximately two centuries ago, the period between 1760-1850 is for many historians the key to unlocking the secrets of technological change and economic development. But some historians have made the terms “industrial revolution” and “capitalism” synonymous with the problems of the working class. Negative interpretations of the Industrial Revolution have led to the popular acceptance of the belief that capitalism made the rich richer and the poor poorer. For many people, the horrors of the Industrial Revolution prove the horrors of capitalism.

The issue of working class poverty and misery during the Industrial Revolution has been and still remains a justification for government intervention into social and economic issues. A vast amount of legislation came about as a response to the anti-capitalist mentality created by negative views of the Industrial Revolution. However, an argument can be made that even though negative interpretations of the impact of the Industrial Revolution are popular, they are not complete and do not tell the whole story. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the standard of living improved as wages rose, while falling mortality rates indicate that the quality of life also improved, setting the stage for the modern comforts that we enjoy today.

An Increase in Real Wages

It is fair to say that the majority of modern economic historians believe that at least a slight increase in the standard of living occurred during the Industrial Revolution. It has become increasingly obvious that wages rose. The evidence is now so conclusive that one historian has confidently declared that “the debate over wages in the early nineteenth century is over: the average worker was much better off in any decade from the 1830s on than any decade before.”

Although the money earned by workers did not increase significantly in the early stages, the prices of manufactured and agricultural goods plummeted as entrepreneurs engaged in economic practices that brought consumers lower-priced goods and services. Additionally, recent evidence indicates that working class wages doubled between 1810 and 1850. As one can imagine, the increase in wages resulted in significant improvements in the standard of living.

An excellent example is the changes in diet that occurred. Per capita consumption of meat, sugar, tea, beer, and eggs all increased. An even better indication of the rising affluence was the great increase of imported foods. Per capita consumption of foreign cocoa, cheese, coffee, rice, sugar, and tobacco increased. Meanwhile, meat, vegetables, and fruits, long considered luxuries, were by 1850 eaten regularly. In fact, the average weekly English diet of 1850—five ounces of butter, thirty ounces of meat, fifty-six ounces of potatoes, and sixteen ounces of fruits and vegetables—is quite similar to the English diet of today.

Although such improvements obviously are important, they take on added significance when considering the large population increase that took place during the Industrial Revolution. Because of a fall in the death rate, the population of England rose 1.25% per year between 1780 and 1860. Rising wages (and consequent increases in food consumption) coupled with a rapidly rising population was a first in European history. The Industrial Revolution provided more food per person, thus breaking the historical pattern in which more people had always resulted in less food per person throughout previous European history.

Untenable Arguments

Critics of the Industrial Revolution and capitalism point to all of the negative aspects of work and life during the era as evidence of problems that came about as a result of the event. However, their criticisms have considerable problems. For example, many of the poor conditions cited by the critics existed long before the Industrial Revolution began. Pre-industrial society was very
Static and often cruel—child labor, dirty living conditions, long working hours, and many other ills were just as prevalent before industrialization. Although by today’s lifestyle, conditions during that time were indeed poor, they were no worse than conditions before the revolution.

Another problem with the criticism is that it fails to take into account the improvement in life expectancy that took place. The great population explosion that happened during the industrial revolution was fueled by a steep fall in death rates. Even in cities, where living conditions are said to have been the worst, mortality rates improved. If living conditions were getting that much worse, then longer life spans would be difficult to achieve. Clearly, improving mortality rates indicate that the standard of living rose during the Industrial Revolution.

Child Labor

Another argument brought forth by critics is that children were forced to endure long hours of work in unhealthy conditions. Although the existence of child labor cannot be denied, some interpretations overstate both its magnitude and the effects on the health of the children involved. In fact, much of the evidence for the arguments comes from the very famous reports from the government committees investigating the factory system. Some historians point out that testimonies were to some degree defective, and the evidence in these reports is weakened by the fact that the doctors who testified against child labor in the factories had not even been in a factory and refused to testify under oath.

Moreover, the great improvement in mortality rates seems to indicate that either child labor was not significantly as deadly as reported or was less harmful than the labor children engaged in before the revolution. It is also important to keep in mind that children were considered small adults, and thus they were expected to work as adults. Yet they were now working away from the home and under the authority of strangers with no time to enjoy childhood like modern kids.

“Opportunity Cost”

According to another argument, rural farm workers were torn from their roots and thrust into the industrial towns and cities, thus losing sense of their heritage and individualism. However, the very fact that workers moved voluntarily from rural to urban areas once again suggests that the advantages of increased wealth outweighed the “opportunity cost” incurred from the move.

Any sociological costs endured during the Industrial Revolution must be counterbalanced against the many sociological benefits. For the first time, there was a sense of hope and optimism. The Industrial Revolution spawned the attitude that progress could be made and problems could be solved. The attitude to social problems that emerged with the Industrial Revolution was that problems should be identified, analyzed, and remedied, either by voluntary or legislative action. Thus evils that had long existed—child labor, for instance—and had long been accepted as inevitable, were regarded as problems to overcome rather than to endured.

Summary

As the above analysis demonstrates, the Industrial Revolution resulted in a significant improvement in the quality of life for the working class. However, progress was slow, uneven, and sometimes nonexistent during many periods. For example, in the early stages of the revolution growth was minimal, resulting in little or no improvement for the working class.

But the evidence of increasing incomes and improving mortality rates indicates that significant improvement took place in the standard of living of the working class. The industrial Revolution built the foundations for our modern society and has led industrialized societies into an age without the famines, epidemics, and other disasters that continually plague preindustrial societies.

Modified for brevity and clarity from: https://fee.org/articles/the-industrial-revolution-working-class-poverty-or-prosperity/