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The Attitude of William Wilberforce and the Evangelicals Toward the Reform of Working-Class Conditions in Early Nineteenth-Century England

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Exiled in America in 1818, William Cobbett mentioned its advantages in a letter to Henry Hunt: "No Cannings, Liverpools, Castlereaghs, Eldons, Ellenboroughs, or Sidmouths. No bankers. No squeaking Wynnes. No Wilberforces! Think of that! No Wilberforces!"[1] Wilberforce was "an ugly epitome of the devil," according to another democrat, Francis Place, after the Peterloo debate.[2] The substance of the charge was that the benevolence Wilberforce expended on African slaves and Indian savages, on everyone everywhere except in England, could have been better expended at home. Abolitionist and Evangelical, Wilberforce abhorred chattel-slavery abroad but tolerated wage-slavery in England. He was a hypocrite.

More recently, commentators have noted the Evangelicals' "willful blindness," "atrophy of conscience," and "lukewarmness" toward the plight of the working man. Eric Williams, for example, in Capitalism and Slavery (1944) cited the abolitionists for their "reactionary" attitude toward domestic problems: Wilberforce supported the Corn Laws, sat on a secret

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1. G.D.H. Cole, The Life of William Cobbett (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1924), p. 226.

2. Reginald Coupland, Wilberforce (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), p. 421.

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committee which repressed working-class discontent in 1817, and thought the First Reform Bill too radical.[3] G.R. Mellor countered in British Imperial Trusteeship (1951) that the severity of this censure was unwarranted: "In economic affairs the pendulum was swinging from the policy of State controls towards the doctrine of laissez-faire....and economists were enunciating the 'iron law' of wages....Nor were the governing classes as a whole fully cognizant of the ghastly state of affairs.... (T)he majority of the philanthropists were churchmen and.... tended to stress moral and religious reformation...."[4] The last point Ford K. Brown stressed in Fathers of the Victorians (1961), urging that it is not possible to bring against Wilberforce a charge "based on a more fundamental misunderstanding of his object and method" than to accuse him of indifference to his countrymen.[5] Through the abolition campaign he served their "best interests": anti-slavery removed from England the shameful blot of sin and inspired those who participated in it with diligence in promoting Christianity at home. Wilberforce's sole concern was the reform of infidelity.

Such are the old interpretations; this paper attempts a new one. Our method: to ascertain by what standard the Evangelicals judged slavery immoral and to apply that standard to

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3. Eric Williams, Capitalism and Slavery (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. 182.

4. G.R. Mellor, British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783-1850 (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1951), pp. 417, 116.

5. Ford K. Brown, Fathers of the Victorians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 262.

the condition of England.

The engine of Wilberforce's activity was Evangelical religion. Its fundamental tenet was the utter depravity of mankind, that mankind is justified in the sight of God by faith alone. Of whomever He will, God maketh His instrument. There are the elect and the blind. The converted must make others good for edification. The Evangelical was concerned with no reform but the reform of vice and sin, and the infidelity that was the cause of vice and sin. The slave system rendered the Africans infidels: it must be extirpated. The trade wrought devastation in Africa, provoked wars, stimulated avarice and sensuality. In such soil the seeds of faith would not prosper. Uncivilized also would remain the West Indies, for the frequent introduction of new savages into the islands rendered it impossible to convert the old ones. Hence the abolition campaign.

But what of slavery at home? Was the condition of England any more congenial to "true religion" than the condition of Africa? With the same enthusiasm he did chattel-slavery, should not a religious man have combatted wage-slavery? He did not because he believed poverty divinely ordained. The poor would always be with us. Blessed are the poor. Why this belief? Because in fact the poor always had been with us, and we perceived not the means to improve their lot. Furthermore, it was expedient for us to believe they must always be with us. If wage-slavery were not God-made but man-made, duty would demand its removal. The poor would cometh into their kingdom, and their kingdom would be of this world.

Fundamental to Evangelicalism was the depravity of mankind, the universal sentence of eternal death imposed by the wrath of God, the consequent need of a Mediator, the duty and privilege of a full surrender of all to Christ. Not a system of morality, it was rather the enlistment of affections and passions in God's service--a religion of motives, not of works.[6] The true Christian, Wilberforce declared in A Practical View (1797), knows that "holiness is not to PRECEDE his reconciliation to God and be its CAUSE; but to FOLLOW it, and be its EFFECT. That in short it is by FAITH IN CHRIST only that he is to be justified in the sight of God." Treacherous is the belief that "(i)t signifies little what a man believes; look to his practice." For the Evangelical morality is rigidly puritanical: nothing belongs to God but belongs to the Bible.[7] Man is eternally reprobate. Christ is his Saviour. What madness is it, Wilberforce exclaimed, "to continue easy in a state in which a sudden call out of the world would consign me to everlasting misery, and that when eternal happiness is within my grasp!"[8] "We have a spark of immortality within us. We are to endure forever and ever," stated Henry Thornton, next to Wilberforce the dominant figure at Clapham.

Those whom God wished, He made His instruments: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners," Wilber-

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6. Francis Warre-Cornish, The English Church in the Nineteenth Century (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1910), pt. 1, p. 20.

7. Brown, pp. 118, 117, 390.

8. Coupland, p. 32.

force noted in his diary. Thornton: all else is nothing "in comparison to the duty of pleasing God, and of doing, without doubt or murmur, what he clearly commands."[9] Charity is an imperative Christian duty: benevolence and philanthropy are virtuous because of the Christian spirit in which they are performed, but by no means in the mere act of helping the distressed. According to Evangelical spokesman Hannah More, "The mere casual benevolence of any man can have little claim to solid esteem; nor does any charity deserve the name, which does not....spring from a settled propensity to obey the will of God."[10]

The elect must make others good for edification: in Thornton's words, "Religion must appear in the life; it should not altogether be hid in the heart."[11] In Wilberforce's, "...the salvation of one soul is worth more than the mere temporal happiness of thousands or even millions." Slavery was wrong primarily because it forced the Africans not to be Christians; they were not and could not be candidates for salvation.[12] Debased they were, from the Evangelical point of view. Thornton observed:

> That they are now sunk in a low and deplorable state of ignorance and superstition no one can surely doubt who has either heard of the Temple of the Juggernaut, or of

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9. Standish Meacham, Henry Thornton of Clapham, 1760-1815 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 17, 15, 25.

10. Brown, p. 104.

11. Meacham, p. 18.

12. Brown, pp. 383, 379.

> the practice of infanticide, or of the cruel and abominable parts of what is called their religion....The very worship in question is barbarous and immoral.[13]

Organized in 1799 by Thornton, Wilberforce, and others was A Society for Missions to Africa and the East (later renamed the Church Missionary Society). It would not succeed while the slave trade endured; rendering Africa impervious to Christianity was the turmoil the trade created. Nor would the Sierra Leone Company, chaired by Thornton, achieve its object of laying a foundation for the happiness of the natives by the promotion of industry, the discouragement of polygamy, the setting up of schools, and the gradual introduction of religious and moral instruction among them.[14] Wilberforce depicted the trade's effects in a 1789 speech opening the Parliamentary campaign for abolition:

> Is it not plain that she /Africa/ must suffer from it--that civilization must be checked, that her barbarous manners must be made more barbarous, that the happiness of her millions of inhabitants must be prejudiced by her intercourse with Britain? Does not everyone see that a slave trade carried on round her coasts must carry violence and desolation to her very centre--that in a continent just emerging from barbarism, if a trade in men is established, if the men are converted into goods and become commodities that can be bartered, it follows that they must be subject to ravage just as goods are? We see, then, in the nature of things how easily the practices of Africa are to be accounted for. Her kings are never compelled to war....by public principles, by national glory, still less by the love of their people. /Ever motivating war in Africa/ is the personal avarice and sensuality of her kings. These two vices of avarice and sensuality--the most powerful and predominant in natures thus corrupt--we tempt, we stimulate, in all these African princes. We depend upon these vices for the very maintenance of the Slave Trade. Does the King of Barbessia want brandy? He has only to send his troops in the night

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13. Meacham, pp. 127-8.

14. Ibid., p. 105.

> time to burn and desolate a village. The captives will serve as commodities that may be bartered with the British trader. What a striking view, again, of the wretched state of Africa is furnished by the tragedy of Calabar. Two towns formerly hostile had settled their differences and....pledged themselves to peace. But the trade in slaves was prejudiced by such pacifications, and it became, therefore, the policy of our traders to renew the hostilities....
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> I must speak now of the transit of the slaves to the West Indies,....the most wretched part of the whole subject....Let any one imagine to himself six or seven hundred of these wretches, chained two and two, surrounded with every object that is nauseous and disgusting, diseased and struggling under every kind of misery!....(N)ot less than 12½% perish in the passage....Upon the whole there is a mortality of about 50%....
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> The Slave Trade, in its very nature, is the source of such kind of tragedies....It is a trade in its principles inevitably calculated to spread disunion among African princes, to sow the seeds of every kind of mischief, to inspire enmity, to destroy humanity; and it is found in practice, by the most abundant testimony, to have had the effect in Africa of carrying misery, devastation, and ruin wherever its baneful influence has extended.[15]

In such a climate Christianity could not thrive: material security was requisite to spiritual progress.

It was not only the civilization of Africa that was stunted by the slave trade; so was that of the West Indies. Fresh accessions of uncivilized Negroes rendered futile the task of converting those enslaved on the islands, as the planters had no incentive to mitigate the physical condition of the slaves--excessive labor, improper food, disease contracted on the middle passage--or to introduce moral instruction as a remedy for dissoluteness: "six or seven hundred thousand human beings," Wilberforce remarked, were "in a state of studiously preserved darkness and degradation."[16] He expected in 1789 that by mak-

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15. Coupland, pp. 120-1, 123.

16. Ibid., pp. 458, 125.

ing new purchases impossible abolition would impel amelioration; but in 1809 he wrote a friend, "It has grieved me not a little to hear that the planters in the West Indies are not at all proceeding to make such improvements in their system as the new situation requires...."[17]

In 1823 the slave trade was flourishing under other flags; the coast of Africa presented all the old scenes, destroying the possibility of civilizing that continent; new slaves were being smuggled into the West Indies, precluding the improvement of conditions and morals. To make the Negroes good for edification, the Evangelicals had abolished the slave trade. To abolish the slave trade, they found they would have to abolish slavery.

Wilberforce judged slavery immoral because the wretchedness it created impeded the conversion of Africa; was not the condition of England just as wretched, and did not duty demand its amelioration to make its victims good for edification?

Debased the poor were. Thornton observed, "....disorders of the most pernicious tendency pervade the lower ranks; and... reformation with respect to them, has till of late, been rather a matter of solicitude and desire, than of serious expectation."[18] In 1802 the Anti-Jacobin Review cited the prevalence of illicit intercourse in the lower ranks and the general dis-

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17. Frank J. Klingberg, The Anti-Slavery Movement in England, 1770-1833, p. 176.

18. Meacham, p. 131

regard there of all moral and religious obligations.[19]

Contributing to this situation was the living environment created by the growth of industry. In 1796 Dr. Thomas Percival composed a series of Resolutions for the Consideration of the Manchester Board of Health, which was reprinted in the report of Sir Robert Peel's factory committee of 1816. Percival observed that living quarters were overcrowded; that this facilitated the propagation of fever; that the untimely labor of children at night and their protracted labor in the day impaired their strength and gave encouragement to the parents' idleness, extravagance and profligacy; that "(t)he large factories are generally injurious to the constitution of those employed in them, even where no particular diseases prevail, from the close confinement which is enjoined, from the debilitating effects of hot or impure air, and from the want of.... active exercises...."; that children employed in factories were generally debarred from all opportunities of education or moral or religious instruction.[20]

Factory overseers who gave evidence before Sadler's Committee (1831) admitted their methods were brutal, that they would be dismissed if they failed to exact a full quota of work, that they administered beatings to children, that dozing children sometimes fell into machines and were mangled.[21]

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19. Brown, p. 16.

20. B.L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, A History of Factory Legislation (London: P.S.King and Son, 1911), pp. 9-10.

21. J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Town Laborer, 1760-1832 (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1967), pp. 159-60.

Inebriation, Robert Owen noted in 1818, was rife.[22] In the same year a petition to Parliament from the Manchester and Bolton operatives stated that they worked 14 to 15 hours a day (including time for meals). The living conditions described by Chadwick's 1842 report were probably little better or worse than forty years before--in place after place over England, 10 or 12 people, 3 or 4 families, living in one tiny apartment, "young men and women promiscuously sleeping in the same apartment."[23] Reflecting the growth of urban areas, general mortality rates from the 1810's-1840's increased: cities in the United Kingdom with populations of over 50,000 multiplied in number from 10 in 1801 to 15 in 1821, with six surpassing 100,000 in the latter; the infant mortality rate in these towns was sometimes twice as high as in the country.[24]

The conditions in which factory hands lived and worked blocked the diffusion among them of true religion; in like predicament were the domestic workers. Between 1800 and 1850 women and children were to be found working in overcrowded, unsanitary cottages, few earning a living wage.[25] Hannah More in Mendip Annals described a village of glassworkers in which 200 people were crowded into 19 hovels: "Both sexes and all ages herding together: voluptuous beyond belief. The work

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22. Robert Owen, A New View of Society and Other Writings (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1927), p. 124.

23. Brown, p. 21.

24. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p.324.

25. R.M. Hartwell, "Interpretations of the Industrial Revolution: a Methodological Inquiry," Journal of Economic History, 19:(June, 1959), 246.

of a glasshouse is an irregular thing,....constantly intruding upon the privileges of the Sabbath...."[26]

The domestic weavers constituted the largest single group of industrial workers in England in the first half of the nineteenth century, their number in 1830 exceeding that in the spinning and weaving mills of cotton, wool, and silk combined. The industry was a dispersed factory in which the material was owned by a capitalist who parceled it out among weavers and marketed the finished product. From 1788 the weavers were exposed to round after round of wage reductions. When the market was sluggish the men, desperate for employment, accepted work from the manufacturer at any price. With the return of demand, the manufacturer released his goods to the market at a reduced price reflecting his low wage bill, glutting the market and holding wages down to the recession level. Wages did rise in 1813-14, but a decline had been experienced at the turn of the century, with a further reduction in 1815 and an uninterrupted decline thereafter. Before the Select Committee of 1834 on Hand-Loom Weavers' Petitions, John Fielden--a wealthy manufacturer and advocate of factory reform--testified that a large number of weavers could not obtain sufficient food and often worked a 16-hour day.[27] While the demand for weavers was decreasing, their number was increasing: weaving was a grand resource of the northern unemployed, as agricultural laborers, demobilized soldiers, and Irish immigrants swelled the work force.[28] Such unbridled competition, overproduction,

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26. Hammonds, Town Laborer, pp. 226-7.

27. Thompson, pp. 192-3, 277-8, 287.

28. T.S. Ashton, The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 81.

periods of crisis, and merciless sweating were as detrimental to the "best interests" of the domestic workers as were wars, devastation, and the middle passage to those of the Negroes.

Similar was the state of those who remained on the land. For the country laborer in many parts of England life between 1750 and 1850 had got worse: he was less likely to own land enough to support himself or supplement his wages, his real wages had fallen.[29] His housing, as traditional, was wretched, perhaps even worse than housing in the new urban areas.[30] But mistaken is the notion that a cataclysmic rural depopulation occurred at this time: between 1801 and 1851 no rural county of England registered a decline in population. The new industrial towns were created not by evicted tenants and dismissed laborers, but rather by the migration of an overabundant rural population;[31] the demographic explosion--an increase of over 50% in England and Wales between 1801 and 1831--had produced more people than the land could employ at a living wage.

The Speenhamland system for supplementing agricultural wages out of the poor rates aggravated the situation by reducing pressure on laborers to move, and destroying their incentive to demand, and the employers' to offer, higher wages.[32]

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29. G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England (Edinburgh: T.A. Constable Ltd., 1962), p. 116.

30. Thompson, p. 318.

31. W.H.B. Court, A Concise Economic History of Britain, from 1750 to Recent Times (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 39.

32. Ashton, pp.4, 77.

Adopted widely throughout the South of England in the years after 1795, it was effective only in keeping wages low; the Committee on Agricultural Wages, of which Lord John Russell was chairman, reported in 1824 that while wages in certain northern counties were 12-15s. per week, those in the South ranged from 8-9s. per week to 3s. per week for a single man and 4s.6d. for a married man. And by that time the Speenhamland system was breaking down on all sides as a means of preserving a minimum livelihood, as the standards of life it guaranteed were progressively reduced. In 1816 Northamptonshire allocated a man and his wife a little more than 3 gallon loaves, barely more than a single man was supposed to need in 1795; the decline continued, as in 1831 a family of four was allowed five gallon loaves, whereas the 1795 standard granted 7½.[33] While the situation of the northern worker was not so acute, many families were pressed hard by the decline of rural crafts, which William Cobbett considered as undermining the foundations of village life. With the improvement of threshing in the 1820's there was less occupation on farms in the winter months, and the agricultural laborer began to share with the townsman the experience of technological unemployment.[34]

Wage-slavery was as adverse to religion as was chattel-slavery, yet aroused no such moral indignation. Why? Certainly Wilberforce and the Evangelicals were aware of the

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33. J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Laborer, 1760-1832 (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1967), pp. 183-2.

34. Ashton, p. 46.

situation. Thornton served on the Parliamentary Committee on Scarcity and drafted its 1800 report; he knew most of what there was to know about national destitution.[35] Hannah More's pages tell us again and again of the indigence of unskilled laborers from the end of the century through the Evangelical campaign; all good Evangelicals read Hannah More. Wilberforce debated and amended the factory bills proposed in 1802 and 1815; he was familiar with the contents of Peel's factory report of 1815.

Nor was it adherence to the doctrine of laissez-faire that tied their hands. Had not the Evangelicals urged government action to halt the slave trade, and had they not supported the early Factory Acts?

Poverty did not jolt the moral security of the Evangelicals because theological dogma and economic law had placed its existence beyond the control of the human will. Of the poor, Wilberforce wrote in Practical View, "....their more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God...."[36] Likewise Hannah More regarded political and economic institutions as a dispensation of the deity, and laid no hand on them in seeking a solution for extreme destitution; rather she accused the poor of worldly mindedness, of not having learned that happiness can be attained as easily by decreasing desire as by increasing gratification.[37] Similarly believed Henry Thornton: "How beautiful is the order of society when every person adorns the sta-

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35. Meacham, p. 138.

36. Coupland, p. 240.

37. Brown, pp. 140-1.

tion in which GOD has placed him...."[38]

Believing charity a Christian duty and poverty inevitable, the Evangelicals met distress with relief, not reform.[39] As did most of Clapham,[40] Wilberforce warmly backed Sir Robert Peel's Act of 1802, which dealt with apprentices working in cotton and woollen factories. These apprentices were pauper children whom the overseers of the South hired out to the mills of the North. The Act restricted their working day to 12 hours; it stipulated that factories be properly ventilated and white-washed twice a year; that separate sleeping apartments be provided for apprentices of different sexes, that each apprentice be given a new suit of clothing yearly, that he be instructed in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and required to attend church at least once a month. Wilberforce even pressed for an extension of the bill to cover "free-labor" children as well as apprentices. He commended a bill Peel introduced in 1818 containing that provision and proposing that no child under 9 should work in the mills, and none under 16 more than 11 hours. The substance of this measure was enacted in 1819, with the hours of labor significantly extended from 11 to 12. The bill's inadequacy led Robert Owen, manufacturer and socialist, to repudiate it: it applied only to the cotton industry, although evidence taken before a House of Commons Committee re-

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38. Meacham, p. 140-2.

39. Ibid., p. 142

40. Ibid., p. 138.

vealed such practices in other manufactures; it did not consider the employment of adults, who were compelled to labor 14, 16, or even 18 hours a day in unhealthy conditions;[41] it left enforcement in the hands of the justices of the peace, though 16 years experience with the statute of 1802 had proved that impracticable.[42]

Such pieces of legislation failed to come to grips with a colossal social problem. Rarely entertained were more comprehensive solutions, such as Owen's for the stringent regulation of adult labor. Wilberforce suggested once that the state function as an employer of last resort, then dropped the idea. Proposals were put to Parliament for the enactment of an agricultural minimum wage, but were rejected. Domestic workers petitioned for a minimum wage and the restriction of machinery, and were refused. Indeed, on this problem, few thinkers focused their attention. God was not mocked.

This faith in the divine ordination of poverty pervaded the intellectual atmosphere of the early nineteenth century. It was secularized in the thought of Thomas Malthus, who published his Essay on the Principle of Population in 1798: population increases at least in a geometrical ratio; under the same conditions food grows at most in an arithmetical ratio. Utilitarianism absorbed Malthusianism: it would seek the greatest

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41. R. Owen, pp. 131-36.

42. Hutchins & Harrison, p. 24.

happiness of the greatest number because the law of population rendered it impossible to secure the happiness of all.[43] Malthus' doctrine was contained implicitly in the thought of preceding British economists, which differed from that of the physiocrats by regarding labor, not the bounty of nature, as the sole source of wealth; from that of the continental economists by finding the standard of value in labor, not in utility: the British school implied that every pleasure is purchased at the cost of an equivalent pain.[44] The law of population underlay the Benthamite concept of the state: according to James Mill, a man must work in order to live, this is the primary cause of government. If the inequality of conditions instituted by nature were destroyed by force, there would only be substituted for it a worse inequality, universal poverty. To protect the inequality of fortunes against violence is, according to Bentham's definition borrowed from Adam Smith, the raison d'etre of government.[45] Poverty was inevitable.

The law of Malthus seemed verified by contemporary economic phenomena, which it accurately represented. Around 1800 Englishmen were struck by the disproportion between the unlimited increase in the number of men and the less rapid increase in subsistence on an island of restricted quantity and fertility. On the strength of his own observations, Ricardo concluded that

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43. Elie Halevy, The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 245, 404.

44. Elie Halevy, England in 1815 (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961), p. 572.

45. Halevy, Philosophic Radicalism, p. 365.

a day's labor always produces for the laborer, no matter what the productivity of his labor, approximately the same amount of food, clothes, and objects of necessity. The value of labor is constant, there is a natural and invariable wage, the wage that is necessary to enable laborers to subsist and perpetuate the race without increase or diminution: this constant value of labor is the actual regulator of the population. Substantiating Ricardo's law was Arthur Young's calculation in 1815 that the rise in wages from 1770 to 1810 corresponded almost exactly to the rise in the price of wheat.[46]

It was not only the conditions of labor in the early nineteenth century that rendered economics the dismal science, but also those of times previous. The condition of children in the eighteenth century appears on the whole to have been bad. The philanthropist Jonas Hanway revealed conditions of workhouse children in 1767 ("The Importance of the Rising Generation") as bad as those depicted in nineteenth-century Parliamentary reports. In 1767 a House of Commons committee collected appalling figures on mortality among parish infant poor, and an act was passed requiring 2s.6d. to be paid weekly for the care of each child and 10s. to be given any nurse who kept a parish baby alive for one year.[47] The domestic system in the first three-fourths of the eighteenth century was characterized by a degraded form of apprenticeship under which children suffered from hunger, over-work, and ill-treatment. The bane of the

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46. Ibid., pp. 490, 346; Halevy, England in 1815, p. 246.

47. Hutchins and Harrison, pp. 5-7.

domestic worker was underemployment, as a tendency prevailed for employers to spread work lightly over a large number of workers, partly to be sure that they would not be short of labor in time of pressure. The worker's bargaining position was weakened by his indebtedness to his employer not only for material but also for borrowings to meet emergencies of birth, sickness, death, or removal to a new home. His cottage was hardly comfortable.[48]

From their observations of conditions at this point in time Ricardo and Malthus extrapolated immutable laws valid in all times. They assumed no massive migration of population would occur and no significant technological advancement be introduced. Only when a more favorable relation between production and population had been achieved could a powerful and better articulated attack on poverty be carried out.[49]

Such a favorable relation was developing in the early years of the nineteenth century with the growth of industry. Such an attack was launched by Robert Owen, who declared in A New View of Society that an intelligent and industrious people would create from the same soil more food in the ratio of one to infinity than one ignorant and ill-governed--a fact Mr. Malthus had neglected to mention. England had the means, he insisted, to educate, employ, and support in comfort a population of at least four times the present number. The

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48. Ashton, pp. 38-9.

49. David Owen, English Philanthropy, 1660-1960 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 96.

new productive power was "already sufficient to saturate the world with wealth, and....the power of creating wealth may be made to advance perpetually in an accelerating ratio." Owen's economics was more sophisticated than most: believing that high wages increased the demand for products, that the manufacturer would suffer if his customers were physically exhausted, ignorant, or in poor health, he contested the iron law of wages. Owen understood that the principle of population was irrelevant to England.[50]

Also optimistic, but for different reasons, was William Cobbett, the agrarian democrat. Cobbett was a man of the country, with no aptitude, he freely admitted, for understanding the affairs of industry--he had been born a peasant and remained a peasant at heart. His optimism was rooted in the productive possibilities not of manufacturing but of land. " I have, during my life, detested many men, but never any one so much as you," he wrote from America in an open letter to Malthus, In the Political Register in 1817 he described a journey through Warwickshire: "....the soil so rich; the herds and flocks of fine fat cattle and sheep on every side; the beautiful homesteads and numerous stacks of wheat! Every object seemed to say: Here are resources! Here is wealth! Here are all the means of national power, and of individual plenty and happiness!...." Malthus was wrong, period.[51]

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50. R. Owen, pp. 58, 169, 24, 145, 144.

51. Cole, Cobbett, pp. 4, 226, 229.

As these comments indicate, the Malthusian idea was beginning to disintegrate. The more the myth diverged from reality, the more untenable it gradually became. But even as late as 1830 this divergence was minimal: the machine had barely begun to realize its productive potential. London in 1831 was characterized by a small-scale, unrevolutionized industrial system, as were other cities. The power-loom had really affected no textile industry but cotton before 1830; hand wool-combing, hardware, cutlery, and leather were similarly untouched. Extensive use of machinery on the land came only in the twentieth century. As noted above, the largest single group of workers were not factory hands but domestic weavers. Outside London and the specifically manufacturing areas, the handicraftsman was common everywhere: blacksmith, baker, wheelwright, saddler, shoemaker, bricklayer, carpenter, mason. In 1825 the railroad was merely a means of moving bulky goods over short distances at moderate speeds to and from tide or navigable water. It was not until 1836-7 and especially the 1840's that railway building boomed: in 1843 there were only 1900 miles of line open; not until 1849 were there 5000.[52] Malthusianism, which barred the possibility of technological innovation, was more compatible with a technology that was embryonic than with one that was mature.

Both a cause and an effect of the prevalence of the Malthusian thesis was the primitive state of contemporary economic science: few early nineteenth-century thinkers related

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52. J.H. Clapham, An Economic History of Modern Britain (Cambridge: The University Press, 1926-38), I, pp. 70, 166-7, 90, 391; Ashton, p. 44.

poverty to the structural and cyclical unemployment of their time.[53] In general, the fathers of the Victorians were inclined to carry over into the new urban-industrial environment answers formulated in the pre-industrial age, when not mass poverty was the critical social evil but pauperism ascribed largely to individual weakness. Thus they mistakenly imposed upon the North of England the New Poor Law, desirable in the South where it abolished the wage subsidies pauperizing most of the population, undesirable in the North where subsidies were not paid, no permanent class of paupers existed, and involuntary unemployment was prevalent.[54] Not comprehended were the sources of poverty.

In fact, the classical economists did not admit the possibility of overproduction or a glut of capital, of crisis, unemployment, and poverty arising from causes inherent in the capitalist economic system. Embedded in classical theory was Say's Law, the "concept that every supply involves a demand, that product exchanges for product, that every commodity put on the market creates its own demand, and that every demand exerted in the market creates its own supply." (J.B. Say's Treatise on Political Economy, 1803) Overproduction of a given product may well occur, but that only indicates that other commodities have not been produced in sufficient quan-

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53. William D. Grampp, Economic Liberalism: the Classical View (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 132.

54. G.D.H. Cole, Chartist Portraits (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1941), pp. 67, 69.

tity to supply the demand for them. A general glut of commodities, as distinct from temporary dislocations in the supply and demand of particular goods, is impossible. Ricardo concurred, and put the causes of economic fluctuation outside the economic system: war, taxation, and fashion might alter the relative profitability of different branches of production; labor and capital would have to be transferred, with distress occurring until the economic system had adapted itself to changed conditions. But adapt it would.[55]

It was Malthus who hit upon the possibility of crisis being inherent in the capitalist system (Principles of Economics, 1820); this analysis, however, did not contravene the theory of population. He defined value as the cost of production, including profits. The sum of the wages workers are paid is less than the sum of the values of their products; wages can never constitute a demand large enough to enable the capitalist to obtain his profit, and therefore to ensure continuous production. Nor can exchange between capitalist and capitalist supply that profit: as both sell the product at a price which includes profit, on balance no incentive to produce remains. Needed to supplement demand is a body of unproductive consumers, landowners and professional men, for example. Without one, periodic overproduction and stagnation are inevitable; with one, crisis can be avoided.[56] As England in the early 19th cen-

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55. Eric Roll, A History of Economic Thought (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1953), pp. 202-3, 188-9.

56. Ibid., pp. 208-10.

tury possessed such a body, the crises that occurred were not inherent in the economic system. Poverty was understood but seminally.

Self-interest further inclined the Evangelicals to view poverty as divinely ordained, as the inevitable result of population surpassing subsistence: such a view justified their possession of wealth amidst the semi-destitute masses. Belonging to the upper classes of English society, the Evangelicals were the wealthy, the powerful, the great. Included in the Clapham sect besides Wilberforce, Member of Parliament and son of a wealthy merchant, and Thornton, M.P. and successful banker, were Zachary Macaulay, editor of the Christian Observer, Lord Teignmouth, peer and former Governor-General of India, Charles Grant, member of the Board of Trade at Calcutta and M.P., James Stephen, lawyer, and John Venn, clergyman of the established Church. For these men religion functioned as a political ideology.

Consider the statement of Evangelical politics contained in Wilberforce's Practical View:

> In whatever class or order of society Christianity prevails, she sets herself to counteract the particular mode of selfishness to which that class is liable. Affluence she teaches to be liberal and beneficent; authority to bear its faculties with meekness and to consider the various cares and obligations belonging to its elevated station as being conditions on which that station is conferred. Thus, softening the glare of wealth and moderating the insolence of power, she renders the inequalities of the social state less galling to the lower orders, whom also she instructs, in their turn, to be diligent, humble, patient: reminding them that their more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God; that it is their part faithfully to discharge its duties and contentedly to bear its inconveniences; that the present state of things is very short...that the peace of mind which religion of-

> fers indiscriminately to all ranks affords more true satisfaction than all the expensive pleasures which are beyond the poor man's reach; that in this view, however, the poor have the advantage, and that if their superiors enjoy more abundant comforts, they are also exposed to many temptations from which the inferior classes are happily exempted; that 'having food and raiment, they should be therewith content,' for that their situation in life, with all its evils, is better than they have deserved at the hands of God; and finally that all human distinctions will soon be done away, and the true followers of Christ will all, as children of the same Father, be alike admitted to the possession of the same heavenly inheritance.[57]

Legitimized were the wealth and power of the great.

The Evangelicals were further bound to the ruling class by their calculation that its support was essential to the reform of the nation's manners. Society would be converted from the top down: by example and authority, the ruling class to a great extent set the moral tone of the people. No Evangelical on record in the period questioned this principle, the most formal and elaborate statement of which is contained in the manifesto of the Evangelical campaign, Hannah More's Thoughts of the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society: "Reformation must begin with the GREAT or it will never be effectual. Their example is the fountain whence the vulgar draw their habits, actions, and characters." Wilberforce noted in Practical View that "the free and unrestrained intercourse, subsisting between the several ranks and classes of society,...favors the general diffusion of the sentiments of the higher orders."[58]

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57. Coupland, pp. 240-1; Brown, p. 120.

58. Brown, pp. 47, 101, 117-18.

Before 1800 Evangelicalsim had begun to win over important peers and peeresses, Members of Parliament and the government, High Church clergymen, affluent merchants, bankers, and industrialists, influential men in the services and professions. The moral, benevolent, and religious societies fostered by Evangelicals beginning in 1787 were "useful" in enlisting influential people to live of the gospel by proclaiming the gospel, of uniting men and women of social power, strengthening them in piety, and giving them coherent purpose and activity. The hospitals, infirmaries, dispensaries, and various medical institutions of London, the British Naval and Military Bible Society, the Sunday School Society, the Marine Society, the Philanthropic Society, the Bettering Society, the Proclamation Society-- all were "useful" because their membership lists included <u>those who count</u>.[59]

The Evangelicals needed the great; Evangelical reform could offer the ruling classes no social, moral, or economic views fundamentally opposed to their own.[60] As the great owned an immense part of all English property, property Evangelicalism must enshrine. Granted, it challenged property by the anti-slavery crusade, but that property was in the West Indies: to assault it was not to undermine the social order in Britain.

Rendering the latter particularly sacrosanct in the early nineteenth century was the panic-fear gripping the ruling

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59. <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 9, 87, 89.

60. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 4.

classes. This had several components: the rapid increase in population seemed to threaten universal famine; the example of French Jacobinism, with the excesses of the Reign of Terror as the most powerful argument, pervaded the intellectual atmosphere, having been used to justify the anti-revolutionary war of 1793 and again and again to stimulate flagging energies and prevent a lasting peace of compromise with the new order in France;[61] assisted by no large and well-organized body of police, isolated on their several estates, and swamped in the mass of agricultural laborers or factory hands, the magistrates were virtually impotent as guardians of law and order.[62] In this atmosphere, criticism seemed challenge, reform revolution.

Factory reform appeared the more radical because of its association with Owen the socialist and Cobbett the democrat. Though Owen eschewed class conflict and rejected a mere change of sufferers from one class to another, his anti-individualism and involvement with trade unions seemed pernicious threats to the social order: false, he wrote, is the notion that individual interest "...is a more advantageous principle on which to found the social system, for the benefit of all, or any, than the principle of union and mutual co-operation."[63] Cobbett directed his attack against the financial system, ob-

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61. Cole, Cobbett, pp. 3-4.

62. Halevy, England in 1815, p. 43.

63. R. Owen, p. 269.

serving that as the National Debt increased, so did pauperism, and inferring that the former caused the latter. He would reform Parliament to halt the payment of interest on the debt and eliminate sinecures and other forms of political corruption that profited the rich. "We want nothing new," he said, "we want only what the stock-jobbers and the place-hunters and the Pittites and the cotton-lords have taken away." The laborers have " a clear right to a maintenance out of the land, in exchange for their labor; and, if you cannot so manage your lands yourselves as to take labor from them in exchange for a living, give the land up to them." Not sentiments that would ingratiate one with the ruling class.[64]

The upper classes mistook the tiny radical organizations of the 1790's for the first rumblings of a national revolutionary movement: democratic agitation prompted the suspension of Habeas Corpus four times and the passage of an act in 1795 subjecting the right to assemble to the discretion of local magistrates and making violators liable to death. Another statute of 1795 punished with seven years transportation for the second offense any person found guilty of inciting by speech or writing hatred or contempt of the King or Government; an act of 1799 suppressed five important societies and declared illegal all societies requiring members to take an oath unrecognized by law. Also in 1799 was passed a Combination Act barring all unions of workers for the purpose of obtaining high-

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64. Cole, Cobbett, pp. 208, 10; Thompson, p. 760.

er wages and empowering magistrates to condemn summarily all infractions. Any hint of conspiracy was quashed. These measures Wilberforce supported.[65]

Also sternly repressed were the Luddite uprisings of 1811-12. Though viewed as insidious threats to the social order, these uprisings of working people were not political riots but despairing revolts against hunger and laissez-faire. 1811 was a year of bad harvest; in 1812 the Orders in Council crippled the textile industry. Some hosiers of the Midlands had violated custom by manufacturing underprice work or lowering wages; their knitting frames were destroyed. Yorkshire woolen workers failed to secure legal action against gig-mills (labor-saving devices used in finishing cloth), unapprenticed men entering the trade, and men possessing an inordinate number of looms; they took vengeance on shearing-frames. Lancashire weavers failed to procure minimum-wage legislation; they attacked power-loom mills. Luddism was met by troops, spies, arrests, and executions.[66] Two acts were passed in 1812, one making the destruction of knitting frames a capital offence, another giving county magistrates exceptionally wide police powers. Wilberforce backed the repressive measures, as did a Secret Committee which admitted that no evidence of the presence of agitators could be found.[67] The ruling classes were phobic.

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65. Halevy, England in 1815, pp. 154, 160.

66. Thompson, pp. 543, 534, 554, 523, 542, 568, 601.

67. Cole, Cobbett, pp. 179-80.

Similar was the reaction to democratic agitation occurring after 1812. Major Cartwright toured the country obtaining petitions and organizing reform groups known as Hampden Clubs. In 1816 a portion of a great crowd rioted during an address at Spa Fields by Henry Hunt; in 1817 occurred the Derbyshire Rising, a local riot apparently resulting from some sort of "physical force" conspiracy intertwined with a government counter-conspiracy. Committees of Parliament convened; the one on which Wilberforce sat found a plot afoot intending "a total overthrow of all existing establishments, and a division of the landed, and extinction of the funded, property of the country." Habeas Corpus was suspended again and another Seditious Meetings Bill passed, as was an act to punish tampering with the allegiance of soldiers and sailors. In fact, there was little chance of a successful working-class uprising in 1817: radical organization was weak, leadership inexperienced. "Conspiracies" were readily infiltrated; the infamous provocateur Oliver reported of the plot culminating in the Derbyshire rising that it was a "weak and impractical scheme, and that if it could be delayed it would blow up of itself."[68]

Democratic agitation continued. Eleven persons were killed when the army broke up a protest meeting in 1819; Peterloo elicited the Six Acts, which authorized magistrates to seize arms and enter homes, restricted the number of legal participants in public meetings, subjected political pamphlets to the tax on newspapers, and legislated against seditious and

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68. Thompson, pp. 650, 669, 654; Cole, Cobbett, p. 215.

irreligious literature. This fear of the lower orders culminated in the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832: to forestall a wave of dangerous and uncontrollable innovation that would completely drown the existing social order, the Whigs were willing to accept political innovation. Grey declared, "(N)ot to do enough to satisfy public expectation, I mean the satisfaction of the rational public, would be worse than to do nothing."[69] Not only were the ruling classes conservative, they were intensely conservative. The Malthusian ideology was solidly grounded in self-interest.

The law of population, the faith in the divine ordination of poverty, pervaded the world-view of Wilberforce and the Evangelicals. It prevented their conceiving the possibility of an attack on wage-slavery paralleling that on chattel-slavery, though these institutions had the same consequences for religion: as inhospitable as slave-raids, wars, and fever in Africa were physical exhaustion, disease, and child labor in England. The prevalence of the Malthusian idea is explained by (1) its conformity to economic reality as perceived by most people. The Industrial Revolution had really affected no industry but cotton in the period before 1830; the railway age had not yet begun. Nascent and therefore less obvious was the technology that would outproduce population and disprove Malthus.(2) the naiveté of contemporary economic

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69. Asa Briggs, The Making of Modern England, 1783-1867 (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 238-9.

thought, which did not relate poverty to cyclical and structural unemployment. (3) its functioning as a justification for the wealth and power of the ruling classes, of whom the Evangelicals were members and whose cooperation they considered essential for the conversion of England: social groups are receptive to ideas consistent with their interests.

To penetrate this ideology the Evangelicals must have transcended class interest and attained the economic insight of a Robert Owen--not an impossible feat, we suppose, but a difficult one.

James Dorey