

PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AND EARLY INDUSTRIALIZATION IN BRITAIN

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IT was the late T. S. Ashton, with his comment in the preface to his volume on the eighteenth century, published in 1955, that no word ending in 'ism' would be found in it, who encouraged an already growing practice among economic historians of referring to change and development by neutral sounding phrases. The implication was, and evidently still is, that specific references to historical or sociological categories—to the concept in particular of capitalism—was somehow not respectable, and if respectable, then not useful. It was an especially silly comment to come from the man who succeeded Tawney at the London School of Economics, not least because Tawney had already commented rather tartly on the attitude that Ashton was later to take up. In the preface to the 1937 edition of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* Tawney wrote these words :

"When this book first appeared, it was possible for a friendly reviewer, writing in a serious journal, to deprecate in all gravity the employment of the term 'Capitalism' in an historical work, as a political catch-word, betraying a sinister intention on the part of the misguided author. A solecism of the kind would not, it is probable, occur so readily today. Obviously, the word 'Capitalism', like 'Feudalism' and 'Mercantilism' is open to misuse. Obviously, the time has now come when it is more important to determine the different species of Capitalism, and the successive phases of its growth, than to continue to labour the existence of the genus. But, after more than half a century of work on the subject by scholars of half a dozen different nationalities and of every variety of political opinion, to deny that the phenomenon exists; or to suggest that, if it does exist, it is unique among human institutions, in having, like Melchizedek, existed from eternity; or to imply that, if it had a history, propriety forbids that history to be disinterred, is to run wilfully in blinkers. Verbal controversies are profitless; if an author discovers a more suitable term, by all means let him use it. He is unlikely, however, to make much of the history of Europe during the last three centuries, if, in addition to eschewing the word, he ignores the fact."

Some part of the explanation for Ashton's approach must lie in the particular moment of time that he was writing. The Cold War was exercising a more baneful influence upon intellectual life in Britain than has often been appreciated, and it certainly accounts for much of the blight that settled upon the 1950s, and made the decade such a dreary interlude in intellectual as well as political history. But another

part of the explanation resides in the ideological attitudes of Ashton himself, a conservative historian, who consciously and explicitly was reacting against the liberal-radical school of historiography, represented above all by the Hammonds. Since Ashton's general approach has been followed by probably a majority of academic historians in the post-war years, it is now unusual for economic historians in Britain to refer in their specialist or in their general writing to historical categories or types of society, and any discussion of change, of early industrialization for instance, is set in generalized terms relating to "the industrial revolution", or to the period of "take off, without reference to the broader context of the society in which these events occurred. There has come about a narrowing of interest from society at large to the more limited problems of economic growth and change. Social questions are nearly always considered separately from economic development; political matters are left almost entirely alone. The economic relationship between cows and ploughs is a proper subject for study, and a contribution to our understanding of the past. But as John Clapham, the wisest of our conservative historians, once observed, economic history is concerned with foundations and foundations exist to carry better things. The cows and ploughs approach is technical history, properly called : a descriptive, not a pejorative term. Grand theorists are rare animals in any one generation and those of us who are professional economic historians will do little else than technical history for most of our working lives. But what is being done must not be confused with the problem of historical interpretation. An understanding of the past involves analysis of the structure of society, in which human agencies, expressed in political aims and objectives, religious and social attitudes, economic motivations, come together to produce distinctive cultural patterns within a given economic and social framework. Change is often slow, sometimes revolutionary, and always refracted through the consciousness of men. To consider only economic factors within a complicated historical situation, and to assume that the result is an explanation of social change in its broadest context, is one version of a vulgar economic determinism.



In recent years attempts at a causal analysis of early industrialization in Britain have once again become fashionable. R. M. Hartwell, of Nuffield College, Oxford, is among those who have sought to establish an interpretative model, and in three essays in the last few years, he has described both the processes of change and summarized the main theories of causation. The results have been singularly inconclusive, confirmed somewhat unexpectedly by Hartwell himself, in a remark towards the end of his methodological article, that the survey of exist-

ing ideas "has added little to our understanding of the industrial revolution"; a fair enough comment, although it is equally fair to add that some of the writers summarized by Hartwell might perhaps think they were given too fine a boiling down.¹

The matter that defeated Hartwell was the very abundance of the forces and factors responsible, or that might be held to be responsible, for the accelerated shift towards an industrial society in Britain towards the end of the eighteenth century. There was present a veritable forest of pre-conditions and pre-requisites through which contemporary historians have so far been unable to find a meaningful way.

Hartwell listed six main groups of economic and social forces and factors that collectively had contributed to the acceleration of economic change in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. These were:

capital accumulation; innovations; fortunate factor endowments; *laissez faire*; market expansion; and miscellaneous (which included wars, the good harvests of the second quarter of the century, the autonomous growth of knowledge and something described as "the English genius").

It was a list that could, no doubt, be extended, but what is not in doubt is the plethora of actual or potential causal factors. What is interesting about this sort of approach is its abstraction from society as totality. The exercise that Hartwell undertook has many uses, and all analysis must first isolate before generalizing, but as Hartwell seems to have admitted, the discussion so far at any rate of this economic factor as against any other in the complex of causal analysis is only of limited conclusiveness.



We need, in order to begin to clear the ground, to set the British experience of early industrialization alongside the record of those other societies which also transformed themselves into industrialized economies by the end of the nineteenth century. (The United States is regarded as *sui generis*, because of the absence of a feudal prelude to industrialization, and, with the United States, the areas of recent settlement such as Canada and Australasia. These countries are excluded from the discussion which follows.) Of the countries of Europe which achieved an industrial break-through before 1914, none began with a pre-industrial level of development, or with such an advanced social structure, as had existed in Britain in the decades before 1870s. And the generalization applies, a fortiori, to Japan. It has been one of Gerschenkron's main themes for many years now that causal relationships in the industrialization process can most profitably be analyzed in terms of "the degree of backwardness of the areas concerned on the eve of their great spurt of industrialization".² Since all the countries

here being considered evolved out of feudalism, this thesis of backwardness could be made more explicit by relating it to the degree of cohesiveness, or the degree of disintegration, of the feudal order in the decades prior to industrialization. One might hazard, as a first rough generalization, that the more feudal the society the more pronounced its economic backwardness, although it must be said at once that this is a statement which says nothing, or which could be misleading, about the potentialities of growth, once modernization and industrialization have begun, for that would be to confuse the pre-conditions with the conditions of growth; a distinction which it is always important to make, in order to allow us to explain, for instance, the reasons for the different growth rates of Japan and France during the first century of their respective industrial histories.



Comparative analysis of the structures of different societies on the eve of their industrializing experience sharply emphasises the uniqueness of British history in the eighteenth century. In no other country did pre-industrial society attain the pervasiveness of the market economy, the widespread acceptance of the profit motive, or the levels of commercial and financial sophistication that existed in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century. Above all, the experience of Britain in respect of the transformation of her social structure prior to industrialization has not been paralleled in the history of any other industrializing society. Nowhere save in Britain was the peasantry virtually eliminated *before* the acceleration of economic growth that is associated with the development of industrial capitalism, and of the many special features of early industrialization in Britain none is more striking than the presence of a rapidly growing proletariat in the countryside. With the partial exceptions of the Prussian regions east of the Elbe (where a landless class emerged) and areas of the Netherlands and Belgium (where tenancy developed) the peasantry have everywhere continued to occupy an important, sometimes a dominant place, in their respective economies, regardless of the pace and tempo of the processes of industrialization. In France, as is well known, the revolutionary events of 1789–1793 abolished feudal rights and obligations, with the peasantry emerging, for the most part, strengthened in their title to the land they farmed. It is agreed that in most countries, as industrialization proceeded and as the market economy began to occupy an ever more prominent place in economic life, the position of the peasantry often came under increased pressure, and just as often weakened; either by an increasing stratification and differentiation within their own ranks, as in Russia in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, or with the growth of tenancy, as in Japan in the years following the

Meiji Restoration. In most countries, too, the numbers of the landless have grown steadily, although this is usually as much the result of population growth as of any other factor. But in no country save Britain has there occurred a total transformation of the rural social structure, and until the years following the second world war, most governments consciously pursued a policy, with varying degrees of success, of peasant protection.

It is an interesting commentary upon contemporary historical writing in Britain that this crucial fact of British history is rarely commented upon and almost never in terms that would suggest its significance or its unusual nature. It is remarkable, for example, that Crouzet, in his suggestive comparison between the economic development of France and Britain in the eighteenth century³ makes no reference at all to the contrast between the capitalist character of British farming and that of the peasant economy of France (with all the necessary minor qualifications that need to be made about the latter's shift from a purely subsistence farming) nor does he mention the presence in the English countryside of a "pure" class of proletarians, so different from the "semi-employed proletarians" in the French rural areas which Labrousse's work has emphasized. David Landes, to give a further example, in the most comprehensive study of British industrialization of recent years, discussed the labour supply of the rapidly growing urban and mining areas only in terms of the Chambers thesis relating to enclosure and labour supply—an argument, it will be suggested later, which is a confusion of the structural problems involved. Since, then, the prior existence of a rural proletariat in the English countryside is so rarely commented on except in limited terms, and hardly ever in the context of the transformation of social structure which it is argued here is the central fact of pre-industrial history, it will be necessary to set out the main lines of the argument.



A schematic summary of British agrarian history from 1500 to the beginnings of the industrial revolution would include the following generalizations:

(1) the development of commercial farming during mediaeval times and the existence, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, of a class of capitalist farmers;

(2) the slow disappearance of the peasantry as a substantial element in rural society over the three centuries from 1500 to 1800, to the point where, in Habakkuk's words, as a significant part of the agrarian structure "the peasants had disappeared *before* the intensive phase of the enclosure movement of the eighteenth century"⁴;

(3) the presence in the countryside, from the sixteenth century on-

wards, and in substantial numbers by the time of Gregory King's estimates, of a class of landless labourers; their swelling numbers in the eighteenth century, in part the result of the further decline of the peasant class, in part the product of natural population growth;

(4) the growth of the large farm—notably in the eighteenth century—and the increasing proportion of the total area farmed by the large capitalist tenant farmers, renting their land from a market-orientated landlord class;

(5) the growing concentration of land in the ownership of the landlord class from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, a process much aided by the ways in which the laws relating to real estate developed. Although there are no precise data for the distribution of landholdings in the eighteenth century, we must assume that by some date (the eve of the Napoleonic Wars? the years following the post-war agricultural depression?) the proportion of land owned by the large landlords to the total land area was roughly that indicated by the so-called New Domesday Book of the mid-1870s;

(6) accompanying the social changes in the agrarian structure went the technical transformation of farming methods. The timing of these two revolutionary changes do not coincide although it is now accepted that the seventeenth century is much more important in respect of technical change and improvements in productivity than was formerly assumed.

It is not proposed in these notes to justify these somewhat stark generalizations, but to concentrate upon some contemporary discussions which either ignore certain of the changes listed above, or which attempt to side-step the general problem of structural change. It would be agreed that most agricultural historians in the past two decades or so have shown themselves much more interested in technical change than in social structure, and one has to go back to the years before world war one to come across a widespread pre-occupation with agrarian social questions of a structural kind.

We begin with a recent volume by Professor Chambers and Dr Mingay—*The Agricultural Revolution, 1750–1880*, published in 1966—which, because of its many attractive qualities, is likely to become a widely used text. In many respects, bringing together as it does the conclusions of the research of the last two decades in a well organized synthesis, it will deserve its wide circulation. The criticisms which follow do not invalidate its virtues, but seek only to suggest certain of its weaknesses; its strengths are taken as self evident. This is a volume in the Clapham tradition; one that minimizes structural change as well as the consequences of change; one that suggests, in rather more positive tones than did Clapham himself, the wrongheadedness of much of the older historiography of the English countryside, and in particular,

that of the Hammonds and their successors. The authors are at some pains, for instance, to write down the social losses that followed the extinction of common rights, but more relevant to the argument of these notes is their emphasis upon the stability of the social structure. The stress is upon slow quantitative change, and the nature of the qualitative changes which altered the foundations of English rural society can only be inferred from a diffuse, and at points, unclear, analysis. Here, for example, is a passage which well summarizes some of the conclusions of this book in respect of social structure :

"The change [to the large farm] was essentially a gradual one: there was no sudden or cataclysmic decline of small farms, and to speak of their 'disappearance' in the eighteenth century is absurd. By 1851 the advance of large scale farming had indeed gone so far that farms of 300 and more acres occupied over a third of the cultivated acreage, while small farms and holdings of under 100 acres occupied less than 22 per cent. But the number of small occupiers was still very large—over 134,000—as compared with 64,200 farmers of 100 to 299 acres, and only 16,671 farmers of 300 acres or more. The family fanner who employed no labour beyond that of his family was still very much in evidence. In 1831 of the 275,000 farming families in Britain, nearly half fell into the family-farmer category."

Throughout this volume there is a most confusing usage of small farmers, small occupiers and family farmers, but mostly the discussion relates to the small tenant farmer whose importance in the agricultural landscape is constantly emphasized. Taken by itself, the stability of the small farmer in a long historical period of change and upheaval is a wholly acceptable point to stress, although it is worth mentioning that most producing units in agriculture the world over are small scale in size, and this for reasons which are a combination of technical, social and geographical. But what is not acceptable is that this emphasis upon the small *tenant* farmer should be used to blur a fact of change which is much more significant, namely the elimination from the English rural economy of an independent peasant class. No account of technical change nor sophisticated discussion of the place of agriculture in the economy as a whole can replace analysis of this central, and unique, fact, of English agrarian history. There are few general readers at any rate of the Chambers-Mingay volume who will emerge with any but confused impressions of the crucial significance of structural change in the eighteenth-century countryside, for the structural question is obscured and distorted by this exaggeration of the position of the small farmer. One could always, of course, write the industrial history of the nineteenth century in terms of the remarkable tenacity of the small producing unit in the face of the large enterprise. Such a point must necessarily be made, but *not* as the central fact of industrial evolution. Similarly, by the same kind of reasoning, as *The Times* Literary Supplement reviewer noted of the Chambers-Mingay volume

"one might argue that England remains a country of minor roads: but this would not be helpful in a book whose central theme was the development of motorways and the increasing traffic which they bore."⁶

The recent pamphlet by Dr. Mingay himself is much less open to criticism than his joint volume with Chambers. Although his pamphlet is concerned to underline the stability of the small tenant farmer over time, it must be said that he makes a much clearer distinction between small owner and small farmer than is evident in the joint volume. Yet again what is not brought out with sufficient emphasis is the general point which is being made here, namely the extraordinary disappearance, unprecedented in history, of a peasant class.⁷



When did the peasantry begin to disappear? It is probable that Marx over-estimated the consequences of the enclosure movement of the sixteenth century, although those who are only too willing to make this point must also account for the presence of a large group of landless labourers by the end of the seventeenth century. The estimates of Gregory King in 1688 suggested that there were about 180,000 families of freeholders (including a large part of the copyholders) against 150,000 families of tenant farmers, and it is the ways in which this substantial body of owner-occupiers disappeared that ought to be the first concern of the historian of rural society. To the elucidation of this question Habakkuk has made a notable contribution, and he advanced the following reasons, in his well-known article in *Annales* :

(1) the peasantry found themselves in particularly difficult times between 1660 and 1740—profits were low because of low prices; prices were extraordinarily erratic, always in peasant society a strongly dis-equilibrating factor; and taxation was high. Many sold out, and the conclusion that Habakkuk accepted, that it was the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century that proved to be the most critical period for the peasantry as a whole, was one shared by many earlier writers, including Marx, Johnson, Davies and Lavrovsky.

(2) there was an increasing tendency, in these difficult decades, for small owners to lease their lands for cultivation by tenants, and this too, under the circumstances of low profits, erratic prices and high taxation (with higher returns to be obtained in the commercial or manufacturing sectors) could lead to an increase in the sale of small properties.

(3) the old established aristocracy were adding to their holdings for a multiplicity of reasons: economic, social and political. There were well known political as well as social reasons pushing towards the engrossment and enlargement of estates, and the use of the strict settlement helped greatly to keep a family's holdings intact from one

generation to another. The market for land must have been affected by the increasing area in the hands of landed families, and competitive pressures in the open sales areas were without doubt increasing. The new entrants into the land market—those who came with money acquired in commerce, State service, colonial trade and administration—must have experienced these pressures, and have transmitted them to the small owners. Habakkuk made the point that one result of this relative stringency in the land market was the acquisition of estates in relatively backward regions of Britain.

(4) there were sound economic reasons which favoured the large capitalist farmer as against the small owner-occupier. The rent per acre for the small farm might be higher in the short run than for the large farm, but the long term appreciation of the holding would unquestionably grow faster in the hands of the larger operators. This was one among a number of reasons why the improving landlord in particular would favour the big farmer and the big farm.

(5) Habakkuk might have made more of a general factor to which he does refer, but which would seem to require more emphasis than he allows. This relates to what may be described as the inexorable consequences of the market economy upon the peasant sector. We are familiar with these consequences in the Russian countryside in the decades following emancipation; but any peasantry living and working within an industrializing and commercializing environment, will be subject to economic pressures and strains. In the absence of direct and indirect measures designed to protect the peasantry, even though there are no engrossing tendencies from the landlord, the general effect of the market economy will be to encourage economic differentiation within the general body of the peasantry.

Such differentiation was certainly taking place in the English countryside during the eighteenth century. Among the evidence is the history of Wigston Magna, an excellent example in the Midlands; Mingay himself has shown the processes of farm enlargement at work for a number of parishes both enclosed and open-field, again mostly in the Midlands, and the material collected by Lavrovsky is especially important. Lavrovsky's analysis was based upon sixty enclosure awards, spread over twenty-five counties and relating to the years 1793–1815. Analysis showed quite sharp divisions between rich and poor peasantry, with the middle peasantry, defined as those with holdings between twenty-five and fifty acres, having become unimportant. Christopher Hill, who summarized Lavrovsky's work from the Russian text, summed up :

"the independent peasantry had already ceased to exist, even in unenclosed parishes, by the end of the eighteenth century. An agricultural bourgeoisie had grown up, few in numbers, but predominant in acreage owned and

leased, employing wage labour to produce agricultural commodities for the market. The other side of this picture was the almost total disappearance of middle peasant proprietors, and the conversion of the small peasantry—still very numerous—into an agricultural proletariat. And this had occurred in unenclosed parishes, showing that though enclosure might facilitate it did not cause the process."

The specialist historian would wish to stress other factors which contributed to this economic differentiation and proletarianization within the ranks of the peasantry: these would include the consequences of tithe commutation, the high costs of enclosure, and the effects of post-war agricultural depression; but the firm outlines of the historical story of peasant elimination remain. It is precisely a firm outline which is lacking in the Chambers-Mingay volume.



There is a further and closely related aspect of social change upon which it is also fashionable today to offer a misleading analysis. Clapham began this particular confusion by remarking, in the first volume of his *Economic History of Modern Britain*, on the extent to which the small farm had persisted and upon the large number of farmers who employed no labour but that of themselves and their own families. The 1831 census data, Clapham wrote, were "entirely destructive of the view that, as a result of agrarian change and class legislation, an army of labourers toiled for a relatively small farming class".⁹ Chambers and Mingay summarized this comment in their own, more emotive words:

"Even in 1831, when farms had grown in size and many small occupiers had disappeared, the proportion of labourers to land-occupiers was still only eleven to four. The picture sometimes presented of English farming, with a select band of large capitalist farmers employing a vast army of landless labourers, is patently a false one."¹⁰

These vigorous phrases—"entirely destructive" and "patently false"¹¹—seem clear enough, except that they do not match the statistics quoted. The 1831 Census returned 961,000 families engaged in agriculture, of whom:

144,600 were occupiers (owners or farmers) who hired wage labour;

130,500 were occupiers (owners or farmers) who hired no labour;

686,000 were labouring families, whose members worked for wages.

Clapham, who gave these figures in his text, then went on to summarize them: "to each occupying household there were exactly two and a half labouring households. . . . If Scotland is omitted the figures for labouring households would be rather higher, perhaps as much as two and three-quarters. . . ." It was from these figures of Clapham that Chambers and Mingay derived their eleven to four ratio of labourers

to land-occupiers. This figure of two and a half or two and three-quarters wage earning households to every occupying household is obtained by taking together those farmers who employed no wage labour with those who did. If only the latter are considered, Clapham went on to point out, there would be 144,600 hirers of labour employing 686,000 labouring families: a ratio of five to one, and a step nearer, it should be added, to the "vast army". Clapham went on further to note that if Scotland was excluded the ratio would be somewhat higher at five and a half to one. Chambers and Mingay, it is worth remarking, stopped at the eleven to four ratio in their quotation cited above from page 18 of their volume; and it was only several chapters, and 115 pages later, that they added the Clapham qualifications excluding the family farmers who employed no labour, which thereby take us to the five to one ratio.

These statistics of 1831 refer to families; they give no indication as to the number of individuals per labouring families who worked on the farms. There is no way of ascertaining, for instance, how many women worked as labourers but in the same volume figures for males over twenty years *are* given, county by county. The ratio of labourers to occupiers who employed labour was as follows: England, 5.3; Wales, 2.8; Scotland, 3.4. Wales was a region of small farms and to include Wales in the English figures always introduces a bias towards the small farm. The Table which follows shows the marked variations within England in the proportions of labour employed per occupied farmer and it also shows how very misleading are the generalizations that use overall averages. The figures relate to males aged 20 and over, and therefore *underestimate* the labourer's side of the equation, since both males under 20 and female labourers are excluded from the calculation.

CENSUS 1831

COUNTY	(i) <i>Occupiers NOT Employing Labour</i>	(ii) <i>Occupiers Employing Labour</i>	(iii) <i>Labourers Employed in Agriculture</i>	(iv) <i>Ratio of fii) to (iii)</i>
BEDFORD	474	1,330	11,588	1: 8.7
CUMBERLAND	2,839	3,617	9,010	1: 2.5
DORSET	967	2,243	14,056	1: 6.3
ESSEX	888	4,561	38,234	1: 8.4
NORFOLK	2,718	5,229	37,466	1: 7.2
ENGLAND	94,883	141,460	744,407	1: 5.3
WALES	19,966	19,728	55,468	1: 2.8
SCOTLAND	53,966	25,887	87,292	1: 3.4
TOTAL: BRITAIN	168,815	187,075	887,167	1: 4.7

The 1841 Census Returns do not add very much to the 1831 data but from the 1851 material we can come closer to the "patently false thesis" argument. In a little used Table for England and Wales there was provided in summary form the number of labourers employed by farmers of differently sized holdings—from under five acres to 2,000 acres and upwards. The data related to just over 600,000 labourers. Aggregating the statistics presented, farms with an acreage of more than 300 employed just over one third of the total number of labourers in the sample; and if the acreage figure is dropped to 150 acres and above—a size reckoned as the beginning of the large farm—exactly two thirds of the labour force was employed. Even more striking was a further conclusion which emerged: if farms which employed 10 or more labourers were aggregated together, it will be found that they employed 42·3 per cent of the total labour force in the sample.¹¹

These statistical results are indeed very different from those presented by Chambers and Mingay. The small farm, by the end of the eighteenth century and still in 1851, had remained an important element in the rural landscape, although more important in Wales and Scotland and more important in England in the west and northwest than in parts of the Midland and the eastern counties. The striking characteristic of English farming, and its distinctive feature compared with the greater part of Continental Europe, was the large farm using hired labour and working wholly for the market.



This discussion of the labour force leads on to another theory first propounded by Chambers, and latterly supported by leading economic historians, including Dr. E. L. Jones and Professor David Landes. In a well known article, "Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution", first published in 1953 and recently re-printed¹², Chambers argued a thesis in direct opposition to Maurice Dobb's analysis in the *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. Dobb was concerned with the historical processes whereby the proletariat emerged as a class in British society, and provided the labour force for both capitalist agriculture and the new industrial enterprises of the late eighteenth century. In his analysis Dobb followed Marx closely and argued that the creation of a proletariat must be understood as an institutional creation—the result, that is, of structural change. For Marx, and for Dobb, the growth of a proletariat was part of the historical process of primitive accumulation, and the emergence of the proletariat was mainly the product of the enclosure movement. Dobb, of course, was aware that a landless class could emerge from within a peasant community in ways other than by forcible expropriation, but although Dobb referred to Lavrovsky's evidence, noticed above,

and also at some length to Russian experience, it was the consequences of enclosure with which he was mostly concerned.¹³ It was this general approach that Chambers argued against in the article mentioned above.

The article by Chambers is a difficult one to summarize, not least because a close reading makes clear the many qualifications which Chambers himself mentioned, admittedly sometimes almost in passing, but which have been for the most part forgotten by those who have accepted what they have believed to have been his main conclusions. Chambers was at some pains to disarm in advance certain of his possible critics by emphasizing that he was not discussing

"the institutional origin of the proletariat, but whether enclosure is the relevant institution; not whether the growth of the proletariat can be treated in isolation from capital accumulation, but what form the relationship took."

So at the risk of oversimplifying, the thesis or rather counter-thesis of Chambers may be summarized in the following terms:

(1) the view held by Marx that the peasantry had disappeared by 1750 is erroneous, and the era of parliamentary enclosure in the later eighteenth century did not "accelerate substantially the processes of proletarianization";

(2) there is no correlation between enclosure and depopulation: the idea, so widely held, that enclosure drove the labourers off the land into the new factories is not confirmed by the population histories of regions or counties. The demand for labour in rural areas rose steadily in the second half of the eighteenth century, and Chambers quotes a comment of Redford's that "During Cobbett's lifetime no single county . . . reported a decreased population at any of the respective census returns";

(3) the farmer-owner, whom Chambers roughly equates with the term yeoman, held his own "or even made something of a recovery, at least during the war-time boom" and the post-war decline "was not catastrophic". Chambers argued that while late eighteenth-century enclosure was one of the factors in "further reducing, but not of destroying, the remaining English peasantry", at the time of the last great wave of enclosures "the rural population in general was unmistakably on the increase" and therefore "the contribution which the dispossessed made to the industrial labour force came, in the majority of cases, from the unabsorbed surplus, not from the main body";¹⁴

(4) This last point is the nub of Chambers argument: agrarian change symbolized by enclosure "cannot be regarded as the chief recruiting agent of the industrial proletariat army"—but where then did this army come from? Chambers answers that the general increase in the population was creating its own proletariat, and that it was this

surplus of population in the rural areas that began to be drained off by the expanding coalfields and the growing towns.

Leaving aside for the moment the arguments themselves, let it be noted that this thesis by Chambers has now become the new orthodoxy. David Landes, in his massive survey of early British industrialization in the *Cambridge Economic History*, refers to the Chambers article with approval, and summarizes as received doctrine the Chambers argument :

"For a long time, the most accepted view [of the recruitment of the early industrial labour force] has been that propounded by Marx and repeated and embellished by generations of socialist and even non-socialist historians. This position explains the accomplishment of so enormous a social change—the creation of an industrial proletariat in the face of tenacious resistance—by postulating an act of forcible expropriation: the enclosures uprooted the cottager and small peasant and drove them into the mills. Recent empirical research has invalidated this hypothesis; the data indicate that the agricultural revolution associated with the enclosures increased the demand for farm labour, that indeed those rural areas that saw the most enclosure saw the largest increase in resident population. From 1750 to 1830, Britain's agricultural counties doubled their inhabitants. Whether objective evidence of this kind will suffice, however, to do away with what has become something of an article of faith is doubtful".

Dr. Eric Jones has summarized Chambers in somewhat more naive terms :

"For long the chief contribution of agricultural change to the development of industry was depicted as the 'institutional' creation of an urban proletariat. Enclosure was the supposed means. It was treated as if consciously contrived to dislodge countrymen from the land and herd them into the new factories. In this form of a concerted, disappearing recruitment drive the view was never very coherent and it was thoroughly exploded by Professor Chambers [in the 1953 article quoted above]. The conspiracy theory of parliamentary enclosure may linger in the doctrinaire wings of economic history but it is no longer a serious proposition that the enclosure commissioners were a kind of capitalist press-gang. . . .

Enclosure hurried the process whereby rural labour became wage dependent . . . [but] There is a conflict of emphasis between Professor Chambers and Dr. Mingay on one side and some other writers on the creation of a proletariat by enclosure. . . . It is apparent that enclosure was not the creator of a labour force".¹⁷

Dr. Jones continued the argument in a way that attempted to include all possibilities. On the one hand, while enclosure was not the creator of the industrial labour force, it was agreed that enclosure did bring "fast changes in agrarian structure at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries". Enclosure set up an increased demand for labour in the countryside and at the same time "Rural labour resisted being sucked into the industrial sector"; but while

agriculture therefore obtained large absolute numbers, "Industry, in fact, had creamed off part of the surplus growth of the rural population for its own work force." This is not perhaps the clearest formulation of the problem! In the Chambers-Mingay volume, the new orthodoxy is given without any of the qualifications in the original Chambers article: "population growth was the main factor in the increase in a landless, as well as a partially workless, labour supply in the countryside."¹⁸

On one matter there is no disagreement: the absolute populations of rural communities increased steadily through the second half of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, and in general, whatever may have been the experience of individual parishes, enclosure did result in an increase in the demand for labour. But on all other aspects of the Chambers thesis, there is wide room for disagreement. Chambers, for instance, is wrong in suggesting that Marx was incorrect to insist that the yeomanry had disappeared by 1750. No doubt Marx ought to have added "as a substantial element of the rural social structure" but basically he was right. As Chamber's colleague has written in his latest statement of the problem:

"Over the country as a whole the small owner-occupiers had already declined to possession of a very low proportion of the cultivated acreage in the later eighteenth century (probably some 11-14 per cent); and they had only a slightly lower proportion in the late nineteenth century; their main decline certainly predates the later eighteenth century."¹⁹

What is still, however, omitted in the most recent discussions, is the large wage-labouring element in the countryside right through the eighteenth century, and it is time to look more closely at the place of this class in the rural social structure.

Its existence as a social group, to go no further back than Gregory King, is well attested for the late seventeenth century, although a proportion, perhaps the largest part, would be semi- or quarter-proletarians, in that wage labour formed only a part of their domestic economy. Gregory King, for the country as a whole, gave the figure of 364,000 families of Labouring People and Outservants, and 400,000 families of Cottagers and Paupers. These two categories, especially the first, obviously cover a number of different sub-groups, and only the most general of statements can be assumed from their acceptance. In 1760 Joseph Massie made a somewhat parallel calculation to that of Gregory King; and estimated 200,000 families of husbandmen and 200,000 families of country labourers. What the differences were between husbandmen and country labourers were not made clear.²⁰

If we move forward to somewhat surer statistical ground in the nineteenth century, the 1831 Census returned 686,000 labouring families in agriculture, with the total of male labourers aged 20 and over

reaching a figure of 887,167. Twenty years later, at the Census of 1851, the total of male labourers of all ages was just over one and a quarter million. How many agricultural labourers were there in 1801? In 1851 they were far and away the largest group of wage-earners, and equally they must have been the largest in 1801, and probably by a larger margin. But how many? Population had roughly doubled in the half century between the first Census and 1851. Unless we assume that proletarianization in the countryside had taken place at a rapid rate and in large numbers *after* 1801 there might have been something over 600,000 male labourers of all ages working in agriculture at the beginning of the nineteenth century, plus an unspecified number of female labourers. The expectation of life in the rural areas was somewhat higher than in the urban regions, and this would tend to reduce the estimate for 1801. On the other hand, the flow of migrants from the countryside to the towns was growing fast in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. It had begun very much earlier, but most rural parishes reached their absolute peak of population for all time at some date between 1820 and 1850, and thereafter declined. There are two related facts which are relevant in the context of the present discussion: one is that rural areas continued to increase their absolute populations until towards the end of the second quarter of the nineteenth century (and within these population totals the absolute numbers of agricultural labourers also continued to grow) but second, the *rate* of increase of rural populations was below that of the national average, and much below that of the urban areas and mining regions. In other words a growing number of agricultural labours (in relative as well as absolute terms) were moving out of the countryside into the towns as industrialization got under way.¹¹

Let us assume that our guessed figure of 600,000 labourers is within 100,000 \pm of a reasonable estimate. We can reduce it by x thousands for every earlier decade in the last thirty or forty years of the eighteenth century. Unless we reduce the estimate for 1801 to much smaller numbers, and we can only do this if we are prepared to argue that rural proletarianization took place on a quite massive scale between 1801 and 1851, we must insist that the wage-earning labour force was easily the largest social group in the rural social structure at any time during the second half of the eighteenth century. It was, probably, much earlier.

There are other ways of arriving at this conclusion, and this somewhat roundabout way has been accepted only because its calculation involved the statement of a number of facts about the rural scene which need emphasizing. The next question to ask is how it came about that the numbers of the rural proletariat were so large by the time that industrialization proper was beginning? For the eighteenth century

we can list the following reasons, although a detailed answer must go back to at least the sixteenth century. First, by the growth in the numbers of those families already proletarianized by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Second, by additions from the families of the poorer peasants who were being pushed into full dependence upon wage-labour by a combination of economic and social forces: these being the workings of the market economy (including severe price fluctuations), high taxation, tithe commutation, and the consequences of enclosure, including the high costs of enclosure. Third, by the growth of population in the still remaining peasant communities, creating a surplus of sons and daughters for whom there was no work save as wage labourers in agriculture, or in non-rural sectors of the economy; and while not all would become wage-labourers, many would. Lastly, by the increase in the numbers of wage-earners already in the manufacturing villages, and by additions to their ranks by the reduction in the economic independence of some, but not all, of the handicraft or domestic working groups.

Since by the middle of the eighteenth century the proletarian element was already the largest social group in the countryside, population growth was occurring within an environment in which more babies would be born into wage labouring families than into any other social group. The demand for wage labour in agriculture was certainly increasing, but population growth was too fast for all the increase in numbers to be absorbed, whether these increased numbers were to be found within wage earning families (the greater part) or within peasant enclaves such as the Isle of Axholme, upon which Chambers, in the 1953 article, placed so much emphasis. If labourers were to eat, many would be compelled to migrate.

The creation of the rural proletariat was, then, the result of a complicated historical situation working itself out in the three centuries before 1800. To describe these causal factors as institutional, meaning those relating only or mainly to the enclosure movement, is clearly too narrow, but to widen the concept of institutional to include all those changes in the social structure which provided a framework for the emergence of a capitalistic agriculture is surely legitimate. But one need not become entangled in semantic definitions. If the workings of the market, which were responsible for a considerable part of the squeezing out of the peasant proprietors in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century are not regarded as coming within the meaning of the term institutional, then another word must be found; but whatever description is used, the processes involved must include the legal changes such as the abolition of feudal tenures and the Court of Wards in 1646, the increasing use of the strict settlement and other legal devices facilitating the rise of the large estate from the middle

of the seventeenth century, as well as the market forces and the better known institutional factor of enclosure.

The question which obviously follows is the extent to which population growth must be counted as an integral part of rural social change—of the loosening of the traditional ties upon marriage, and of the increased demand for labour—or as an autonomous growth in itself. While everyone recognizes the complexity of this problem, the latter argument is now hard to sustain. Chambers himself in the 1953 article has much to say about the upturn in the marriage rate from the middle of the eighteenth century in the Nottinghamshire villages which he studied in detail in terms of the increasing demand for labour, and more recent demographic studies have also emphasized the forces that were playing on the marriage rate and the age of marriage. There is today an increasing body of opinion which has moved closer to Arthur Young: "It is employment that creates population: marriages are early and numerous in proportion to the amount of employment"; and comparative studies—for example, of the Prussian region east of the Elbe—suggests that this is the most useful hypothesis for further research.²²



There is one other aspect of the problem that must be briefly commented on, since it is often overlooked in the comparative discussion of modern British history and that of other industrializing societies. The processes of change which resulted in the disappearance of the peasantry and the emergence of a rural proletariat are properly described as the *divorce* of the labourer from the land: a divorce which is as much the appropriation of common rights as it is of the consolidation of holdings. The working class in Britain were unique in all industrializing societies, at least in their early decades, in that the rupture with peasant society was total and complete. Except for those migrants to the towns and mining areas who came from the few remaining enclaves of small owner-occupiers, the rural labourers who swelled the urban populations in Britain had no links at all with any social groups who had access to land holding. The Irish were, of course, in a different position, but within the national boundaries of Britain those who sought work beyond the rural communities came from wage labouring families whose own ties with land ownership were now a matter only of history. It is this fact that makes the intense desire of such large sections of the urban working-class for a return to the land so poignant and so *hopeless*.²³



The problem which first confronts marxist historians concerned with the development of industrial capitalism in Britain is whether

Marx was right or wrong in the analysis that he presented in the last section of Volume I of *Capital*, and to what extent his formulations have to be altered or modified. It is unusual in Marx's historical writings that we have such a complete and explicit account of a major historical transformation, for much of Marx's better known historical work was an immediate reaction to contemporary events, or it was analysis of an historical situation demanded by contemporary events. The fact that we have such a complete model of what are today described as the pre-conditions for industrial development makes it all the more surprising that British historians, with the notable exception of Maurice Dobb, have paid so little attention to the questions that Marx raised, and to the way that he shaped his generalizations. This is less true, it must be added, of the seventeenth century than it is of the century immediately preceding industrialization. We begin, then with a brief statement of the model elaborated by Marx, set out in Part VIII of Volume I under the title "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation".

* * *

The term "primitive" is not perhaps the most suitable word that could have been chosen by the translators. The German text, "die ursprüngliche Akkumulation" could equally well be translated as primary or original, and original is sometimes used by marxist as well as by non-marxist scholars; but the English translation is so widely used, and the term primitive has become so well known, that it would be pedantic now to change its usage.

The term itself, however, has given rise to certain misconceptions. Marx began by defining primitive accumulation in this way :

"But the accumulation of capital pre-supposes surplus value; surplus value pre-supposes capitalistic production; capitalistic production pre-supposes the pre-existence of considerable masses of capital and of labour power in the hands of the producers of commodities. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn in a vicious circle out of which we can only get by supposing a primitive accumulation (previous accumulation of Adam Smith) preceeding capitalistic accumulation; an accumulation not the result of the capitalist mode of production, but its starting point."²⁵

It will be appreciated that in this first statement of the matter, Marx was referring to both sides of the equation, that is to both capital and labour; but more often than not, primitive accumulation has been assumed to mean only the accumulation of capitals which are then channelled into industrial development. Professor David Landes, for example, in his recent survey in the *Cambridge Economic History* appears to assume that this is what the term implies;²⁶ and even Gershenkron, who is more careful than most in his reading of Marx,

occasionally suggests the narrow sense of the term²⁶. Marx was, however, quite explicit: he was using the concept to include both the emergence of the industrial capitalists ("who are eager to increase the sum of the values they possess, by buying other people's labour power"²⁷) and the creation of a class of free labourers, free in the double sense of having no feudal obligations and also being free from, "unencumbered by", any property of their own. Marx's pre-conditions, therefore, involved a transformation of the previous social structure; as the result of which the independent peasantry were eliminated as a significant part of the rural structure, being replaced by a landless class, who worked for wages; and the other side of the process was the concentration of property into relatively few hands, and its conversion into capital for industrial development. In describing these changes Marx made it clear that he was using England as his example, for England exhibited the "classic" form in which the pre-industrial transformation occurred; a matter discussed below, because this too has led to much confusion and misapplication of Marx's model.

After his preliminary statement of the problem in chapter 26, Marx then proceeded in the next three chapters to discuss the ways in which the agricultural population had become separated from the land they owned as the consequence of the enclosure movements of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. By the middle of the eighteenth century, he wrote, the peasantry had disappeared, and by the end of that century the last traces of the common land of the labourers had gone. The forcible measures used in the sixteenth century had become transmuted into the legal powers over enclosure acquired by the eighteenth century landlords through their control of state power; but the economic and social consequences were broadly the same.

These historical processes which created the landless labouring class also involved the emergence of a class of capitalist farmer by the end of the sixteenth century—"rich, considering the circumstances of the time"—and the development of a capitalistic agriculture. Moreover, "the events that transformed the small peasants into wage labourers, and their means of subsistence and of labour into material elements of capital, created, at the same time, a home market for the latter". The decline of the self-subsistence unit was inevitably paralleled by the growth of the market for commodities; and at the same time the destruction of rural domestic industry further extended the scope of the home market, although, Marx added, it is only in the modern industrial period that the separation between agricultural and rural industry becomes more or less complete. This emphasis by Marx upon the widening of the market as a crucial by-product of the structural changes in the countryside, and as a necessary part of the development

of industrial capitalism was much more than an extension of Adam Smith's discussion of the market problem since it was understood by Marx as part of the whole historical process of change over three centuries. He followed this discussion of the home market with an account of the origins of the industrial capitalist, although this section should be read in conjunction with the more extended analysis of mercantile capital—and of the two ways in which the industrial capitalist emerged—in chapter XX of volume III of *Capital*. In the original chapter in Volume I Marx mainly concerned himself with the various sources of pre-industrial wealth which could later be turned into industrial capital. "The different momenta of primitive accumulation" he wrote, exist in England at the end of the seventeenth century as "a systematical combination, embracing the colonies, the national debt, the modern mode of taxation, and the protectionist system. These methods depend in part on brute force, e.g. the colonial system. [here Marx was referring, inter *alia*, to the slave trade] But they all employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, in hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power".²⁰

What Marx was doing, then, in these brilliantly suggestive chapters was to outline in summary form the pre-conditions which were leading towards the acceleration of economic growth associated with the development of industrial capitalism in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. His model has been broadly confirmed in its fundamental correctness by later research. Above all, Marx understood the dialectical relationship between the growth of a capitalistic agriculture, with its accompanying social changes, and the development of the rest of the economy: a relationship that has only begun to be explored in depth in the past decade or so. It is relevant at this point to ask to what extent the model of primitive accumulation fits the experience of other countries which have since industrialized. Obviously, in any analysis of the pre-conditions of capitalist development one looks for the ways in which a proletariat emerges: for the sources of capital for both the infra-structure and industrial enterprises: at the growth of trade as well as of petty commodity production; and so on. But when Marx emphasized that the expropriation of the agricultural producer from the soil was "the basis of the whole process" he went on to comment that the forms this appropriation assumed were different in different countries, whereas he was taking his examples from England, "the classic form". In the whole section in volume I devoted to primitive accumulation, Marx paid little attention to the experience of any other country save Britain, and it would be quite

unhistorical to take his analysis and try to fit it tout simplement to the patterns of change in other countries. In this respect as in many others, his analysis is not an arithmetical formula to be applied straightforwardly to other industrializing societies, and this is the error which has apparently befogged many of the discussions of Soviet historians on this question.¹⁹

Most feudal or post feudal societies, on the eve of their modernization, have only a limited number of the factors required for the breakthrough onto the levels of growth associated with the new industrial order. Nowhere is there the long list of favourable institutions and social and political factors that can be presented for Britain. Most countries pick up, as it were, their pre-conditions of growth during the earlier decades of their industrial development. This is why the political framework, in particular the role of the State, is so crucial. The example of British pre-industrial history can certainly offer suggestive questions to be asked of other countries' growth and development, but it is *sui generis*, and must always be understood as such. What Marx did for Britain has to be done by others for their own societies. Moreover, the achievement by Britain of a dynamically expanding capitalism decades before it was present anywhere else was a major fact of world history, and one which altered dramatically the parameters of all later development. The fact of British industrialization changed the character of the pre-conditions, and the conditions of growth, in every other country. After 1815 Britain provided large drafts of capital for the rest of the economic world, and from the point of view of the receiving countries who were themselves on the eve of their industrializing experience, this capital must be counted part of their original accumulation. Marx himself referred to this in his discussion of the growth of national debt. There develops, he wrote :

"an international credit system, which often conceals one of the sources of primitive accumulation in this or that people. Thus the villainies of the Venetian thieving system formed one of the secret bases of the capital-wealth of Holland to whom Venice in her decadence lent large sums of money. So also was it with Holland and England. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Dutch manufactureres were far outstripped. Holland had ceased to be the nation preponderant in commerce and industry. One of its main lines of business, therefore, from 1701-1776, is the lending out of enormous amounts of capital, especially to its great rival England. The same thing is going on today between England and the United States. A great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any certificate of birth, was yesterday, in England, the capitalised blood of children."²⁰



The neglect by British historians of the fundamental changes in economic and social structure, and of the political manifestations of

these changes, has led to much too sharp a distinction being made between the pre-conditions of growth and the conditions of growth in the decades immediately preceding 1780. In all other countries which industrialized out of a feudal background, these distinctions are clear enough, and are to be related to their general economic backwardness prior to industrialization. But in Britain all the factors required for the qualitative shift into the era of industrial capitalism were already present and working vigorously. Marx, in his model of primitive accumulation, seems to assume that around the middle of the eighteenth century the basic framework for industrialization was already completed, and a study of the pre-conditions of growth in Britain needs to be related to at least the century before 1750. In this context Christopher Hill's analysis of the economic consequences of the Civil War, is especially relevant.²¹ Naturally, there is much unevenness in economic and social change, and everyone is aware of the lags as well as the advances in industrial organization right down to the end of the nineteenth century, and beyond. But sometime around the middle of the eighteenth century, with a dynamically expanding capitalist agriculture, a high rate of domestic capital accumulation, an increasingly favourable market situation, both at home and abroad, and, not least, with many hundreds of thousands of wage-labourers whose numbers were beginning to grow fast, the main question to be asked is not *why* but *when*. It is the *timing* of the surge forward that is now on the order of the day: an interesting but not a fundamental question; for the latter had already been decided.

Those who seek a causative analysis of the emergence of industrial capitalism in Britain should begin with Edward Thompson's picture of the eighteenth century gentry: "a superbly successful and self-confident capitalist *class*";²² and at the other end of the social scale with the proletarianized labourers, so many of whom, or their offspring, were to provide the first generations of the industrial labour force. The analysis should take note of the political framework within which these new classes were to be found; with the control of the State by the landed groups, the greater part of whom were already market-orientated, and of the ways in which they were using State power to further their own economic and political ends. Foreign policy which they controlled, was the direct instrument of national economic interest. It was a society in which the penetration of the capitalist ethos had reached into all important sectors of economic life, in which economic affairs were closely articulated to the balances of profit and loss. What Engels described in 1858 as "this most bourgeois of all nations" was already, a hundred years earlier, energetically accepting the full implications of the market economy, and in the process crushing or snuffling out the many manifestations of the traditional "moral economy". It

is when this understanding of the nature and character of later eighteenth century society is appreciated, that the economic historian can then begin to fill in the complex details of economic change.

NOTES

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 22. Werner Conze, "Agrarian Reform in Central Europe", *The Nineteenth Century World* *éd.* G. S. Môtreaux and F. Crouzet, 1963, pp. 86-103.

23. I am much obliged to Edward Thompson for discussion of this, and related, points.
24. Karl Marx, *Capital* (1886), p. 736.
25. Landes, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-310.
26. Gerschenkron, *op. cit.*, p. 33ff.
27. Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 737.
28. *Ibid*, p. 776.
29. As reported, for example, in Gerschenkron, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-106.
30. Marx, *op. cit.*, pp. 780-781.
31. See his latest volume, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution* (1967), Part III.
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