

# OBSERVATIONS

ON THE EFFECT OF

## *The Manufacturing System :*

WITH HINTS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THOSE PARTS  
OF IT WHICH ARE MOST INJURIOUS TO HEALTH  
AND MORALS.

DEDICATED MOST RESPECTFULLY TO  
*THE BRITISH LEGISLATURE.*

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BY ROBERT OWEN.

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THE SECOND EDITION.

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**London :**

PRINTED FOR LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, AND BROWN, PATERNOSTER ROW; CADELL AND DAVIES, STRAND; J. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY; MURRAY, ALBEMARLE-STREET: CONSTABLE AND CO., AND OLIPHANT AND CO., EDINBURGH: SMITH AND SONS, AND BRASH AND REID, GLASGOW: AND SOLD BY ALL THE BOOKSELLERS IN TOWN AND COUNTRY.

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# OBSERVATIONS

**On the Effect of the Manufacturing System etc. <sup>1</sup>**

(1815)

Those who were engaged in the trade, manufactures, and commerce of this country thirty or forty years ago, formed but a very insignificant portion of the knowledge, wealth, influence, or population of the Empire.

Prior to that period, Britain was essentially agricultural. But, from that time to the present, the home and foreign trade have increased in a manner so rapid and extraordinary as to have raised commerce to an importance, which it never previously attained in any country possessing so much political power and influence.

(By the returns to the Population Act in 1811, it appears that in England, Scotland and Wales, there are 895,998 families chiefly employed in agriculture - 1,129,049 families chiefly employed in trade and manufactures - 640,500 individuals in the army and navy -and 519,168 families not engaged in any of these

employments. It follows that nearly half as many more persons are engaged in trade as in agriculture - and that of the whole population the agriculturists are about 1 to 3. )

This change has been owing chiefly to the mechanical inventions which introduced the cotton trade into this country, and to the cultivation of the cotton tree in America. The wants which this trade created for the various materials requisite to forward its multiplied operations, caused an extraordinary demand for almost all the manufactures previously established, and, of course, for human labour. The numerous fanciful and useful fabrics manufactured from cotton soon became objects of desire in Europe and America: and the consequent extension of the British foreign trade was such as to astonish and confound the most enlightened statesmen both at home and abroad.

The immediate effects of this manufacturing phenomenon were a rapid increase of the wealth, industry, population, and political influence of the British Empire; and by the aid of which it has been enabled to contend for five-and-twenty years against the most formidable military and immoral power that the world perhaps ever contained.

These important results, however, great as they really are, have not been obtained without accompanying evils of such a magnitude as to raise a doubt whether the latter do not preponderate over the former.

Hitherto, legislators have appeared to regard manufactures only in one point of view, as a source of national wealth.

The other mighty consequences which proceed from extended manufactures *when left to their natural progress*, have never yet engaged the attention of any legislature. Yet the political and moral effects to which we allude, well deserve to occupy the best faculties of the greatest and the wisest statesmen.

The general diffusion of manufactures throughout a country generates a new character in its inhabitants; and as this character is formed upon a principle quite unfavourable to individual or general happiness, it will produce the most lamentable and permanent evils, unless its tendency be counteracted by legislative interference and direction.

The manufacturing system has already so far extended its influence over the British Empire, as to effect an essential change in the general character of the mass of the people. This alteration is still in rapid progress; and ere long, the comparatively happy simplicity of the agricultural peasant will be wholly lost amongst us. It is even now scarcely anywhere to be found without a mixture of those habits which are the offspring of trade, manufactures, and commerce.

The acquisition of wealth, and the desire which it naturally creates for a continued increase, have introduced a fondness for essentially injurious luxuries among a numerous class of individuals who formerly never thought of them, and they have also generated a disposition which strongly impels its possessors to sacrifice the best feelings of human nature to this love of accumulation. To succeed in this career, the industry of the lower orders, from whose labour this wealth is now drawn, has been carried by new competitors striving against those of longer standing, to a point of real oppression, reducing them by successive changes, as the spirit of competition increased and the ease of acquiring wealth diminished, to a state more wretched than can be imagined by those who have not attentively observed the changes as they have gradually occurred. In consequence, they are at present in a situation infinitely more degraded and miserable than they were before the introduction of these manufactories, upon the success of which their bare subsistence now depends.

To support the additional population which this increased demand for labour has produced, it now becomes necessary to maintain the present extent of our foreign trade, or, under the existing circumstances of our population, it will become a serious and alarming evil. It is highly probable, however, that the export trade of this country has attained its utmost height, and that by the competition of other states, possessing equal or greater local advantages, it will now gradually diminish.

The direct effect of the Corn-bill lately passed <sup>2</sup> will be to hasten this decline and prematurely to destroy that trade. In this view it is deeply to be regretted that the bill passed into a law; and I am persuaded its promoters will ere long discover the absolute necessity for its repeal, to prevent the misery which must ensue to the great mass of the people.

The inhabitants of every country are trained and formed by its great leading existing circumstances, and the character of the lower orders in Britain, is now formed chiefly by circumstances arising from trade, manufactures, and commerce; and the governing principle of trade, manufactures, and commerce, is immediate pecuniary gain, to which on the great scale every other is made to give way. All are sedulously trained to buy cheap and to sell dear; and to succeed in this art, the parties must be taught to acquire strong powers of deception; and thus a spirit is generated through every class of traders, destructive of that open, honest sincerity, without which man cannot make others happy, nor enjoy happiness himself.

Strictly speaking, however, this defect of character ought not to be attributed to the individuals possessing it, but to the overwhelming effect of the system under which they have been trained.

But the effects of this principle of gain, unrestrained, are still more lamentable on the working classes, those who are employed in the operative parts of the manufactures; for most of these branches are more or less unfavourable to the health and morals of adults. Yet parents do not hesitate to sacrifice the well-being of their children by putting them to occupations by which the constitution of their minds and bodies is rendered greatly inferior to what it might and ought to be under a system of common foresight and humanity.

Not more than thirty years since, the poorest parents thought the age of fourteen sufficiently early for their children to commence regular labour: and they judged well; for by that period of their lives they had acquired by play and exercise in the open air, the foundation of a sound robust constitution; and if they were not all initiated in book learning, they had been taught the far more useful knowledge of domestic life, which could not but be familiar to them at the age of fourteen, and which, as they grew up and became heads of families, was of more value to them (as it taught them economy in the expenditure of their earnings) than one half of their wages under the present circumstances.

It should be remembered also that twelve hours per day including the time for regular rest and meals, were then thought sufficient to extract all the working strength of the most robust adult; when it may be remarked local holidays were much more frequent than at present in most parts of the kingdom.

At this period, too, they were generally trained by the example of some landed proprietor, and in such habits as created a mutual interest between the parties, by which means even the lowest peasant was generally considered as belonging to, and forming somewhat of a member of, a respectable family. Under these circumstances the lower orders experienced not only a considerable degree of comfort, but they had also frequent opportunities of enjoying healthy rational sports and amusements; and in consequence they became strongly attached to those on whom they depended; their services were willingly performed; and mutual good offices bound the parties by the strongest ties of human nature to consider each other as friends in somewhat different situations; the servant indeed often enjoying more solid comfort and ease than his master.

Contrast this state of matters with that of the lower orders of the present day; - with human nature trained as it now is, under the new manufacturing system.

In the manufacturing districts it is common for parents to send their children of both sexes at seven or eight years of age, in winter as well as summer, at six o'clock in the morning, sometimes of course in the dark, and occasionally amidst frost and snow, to enter the manufactories, which are often heated to a high temperature, and contain an atmosphere far from being the most favourable to human life, and in which all those employed in them very frequently continue until twelve o'clock at noon, when an hour is allowed for dinner, after which they return to remain, in a majority of cases, till eight o'clock at night.

The children now find they must labour incessantly for their bare subsistence: they have not been used to innocent, healthy, and rational amusements; they are not permitted the requisite time, if they had been previously accustomed to enjoy them. They know not what relaxation means, except by the actual cessation from labour. They are surrounded by others similarly circumstanced with themselves; and thus passing on from childhood to youth, they become gradually initiated, the young men in particular, but often the young females also, in the seductive pleasures of the pot-house and inebriation: for which their daily hard labour, want of better habits, and the general vacuity of their minds, tend to prepare them.

Such a system of training cannot be expected to produce any other than a population weak in bodily and mental faculties, and with habits generally destructive of their own comforts, of the well-being of those around them, and strongly calculated to subdue all the social affections. Man so circumstanced sees all around him hurrying forward, at a mail-coach speed, to acquire individual wealth, regardless of his comforts, his wants, or even his sufferings, except by way of a *degrading parish charity*, fitted only to steel the heart of man against his fellows, or to form the tyrant and the slave. To-day he labours for one master, tomorrow for a second, then for a third, and a fourth, until all ties between employers and employed are frittered down to the consideration of what immediate gain each can derive from the other.

The employer regards the employed as mere instruments of gain, while these acquire a gross ferocity of character, which, if legislative measures shall not be judiciously devised to prevent its increase, and ameliorate the condition of this class, will sooner or later plunge the country into a formidable and perhaps inextricable state of danger.

The direct object of these observations is to effect the amelioration and avert the danger. The only mode by which these objects can be accomplished is to obtain an Act of Parliament,

1st. To limit the regular hours of labour in mills of machinery to twelve per day, including one hour and a half for meals.

2nd. To prevent children from being employed in mills of machinery until they shall be ten years old, or that they shall not be employed more than six hours per day until they shall be twelve years old.

3rd. That children of either sex shall not be admitted into any manufactory, - after a time to be named, - until they can read and write in an useful manner, understand the first four rules of arithmetic, and the girls be likewise competent to sew their common garments of clothing.

These measures, when influenced by no party feelings or narrow mistaken notions of immediate self-interest, but considered solely in a national view, will be found to be beneficial to the child, to the parent, to the employer, and to the country. Yet, as we are now rained, many individuals cannot detach general subjects from party considerations, while others can see them only through the medium of present pecuniary gain. It may thence be concluded, that individuals of various descriptions will disapprove of some or all of these measures. I will therefore endeavour to anticipate their objections, and reply to them.

The child cannot be supposed to make any objection to the plans proposed: he may easily be taught to consider them, as they will prove to be by experience, essentially beneficial to him in childhood, youth, manhood, and old age.

Parents who have grown up in ignorance and bad habits, and who consequently are in poverty, may say `We cannot afford to maintain our children until they shall be twelve years of age, without putting them to employment by which they may earn wages, and we therefore object to that part of the plan which precludes us from sending them to manufactories until they shall be of that age.'

If the poorest and most miserable of the people formerly supported their children without regular employment until they were fourteen, why may they not now support them until they shall be twelve years old? If parents who decline this duty had not been ignorant and trained in bad habits which render their mental faculties inferior to the instinct of many animals, they would understand that by forcing their children

to labour in such situations at a premature age, they place their offspring in circumstances calculated to retard their growth, and make them peculiarly liable to bodily disease and mental injury, while they debar them the chance of acquiring that sound robust constitution which otherwise they would possess, and without which they cannot much happiness, but must become a burthen to themselves, their friends, and their country. Parents by so acting also deprive their children of the opportunity of acquiring the habits of domestic life, without a knowledge of which high nominal wages can procure them but few comforts, and without which among the working classes very little domestic happiness can be enjoyed.

Children thus prematurely employed are prevented from acquiring any of the common rudiments of book learning; but in lieu of this useful and valuable knowledge, they are likely to acquire the most injurious habits by continually associating with those as ignorant and as ill instructed as themselves. And thus it may be truly said, that for every penny gained by parents from the premature labour of their offspring, they sacrifice not only future pounds, but also the future health, comfort, and good conduct of their children; and unless this pernicious system shall be arrested by the introduction of a better, the evil is likely to extend, and to become worse through every succeeding generation.

I do not anticipate any objection from employers to the age named for the admittance of children into their manufactories; or to children being previously trained in good habits and the rudiments of common learning; for, upon an experience abundantly sufficient to ascertain the fact, I have uniformly found it to be more profitable to admit children to constant daily employment at ten years old, than at any earlier period; and that those children, or adults, who had been the best taught, made the best servants, and were by far the most easily directed to do everything that was right and proper for them to perform. The proprietors of expensive establishments may object to the reduction of the *now* customary hours of labour. The utmost extent however of their argument is, that the rent or interest of the capital expended in forming the establishment is chargeable on the quantity of its produce; - and if, instead of being permitted to employ their work-people within their manufactories so long as human nature can be tempted to continue its exertions, say for fourteen or fifteen hours per day, they shall be restricted to twelve hours of labour per day from their work-people, then the prime cost of the article which they manufacture will be increased by the greater proportion of rent or interest which attaches to the smaller quantity produced. If, however, this law shall be, as it is proposed, general over England, Scotland, and Ireland, whatever difference may ultimately arise in the prime cost of the articles produced in these manufactories, will be borne by the consumers, and not by the proprietors of such establishments. And, in a national view, the labour which is exerted twelve hours per day will be obtained more economically than if stretched to a longer period.

I doubt, however, whether any manufactory, so arranged as to occupy the hands employed in it twelve hours per day, will not produce its fabric, even to the immediate proprietor, nearly if not altogether as cheap as those in which the exertions of the employed are continued to fourteen or fifteen hours per day.

Should this, however, not prove to be the case to the extent mentioned, the improved health, the comforts, useful acquirements of the population, and the diminution of poors-rates, naturally consequent on this change in the manners and habits of the people, will amply compensate to the country for a mere fractional addition to the prime cost of any commodity.

And is it to be imagined that the British Government will ever put the chance of a trivial pecuniary gain of a few, in competition with the solid welfare of so many millions of human beings?

The employer cannot be injured by being obliged so to act towards his labourers as, for the interest of the country, he should act. Since the general introduction of expensive machinery, human nature has been forced far beyond its average strength; and much, very much private misery and public injury are the consequences.

It is indeed a measure more to be deplored in a national view than almost any other that has occurred for many centuries past. It has deranged the domestic habits of the great mass of the people. It has deprived them of the time in which they might acquire instruction, or enjoy rational amusements. It has robbed them

of their substantial advantages, and, by leading them into habits of the pot-house and inebriation, it has poisoned all their social comforts.

Shall we then make laws to imprison, transport, or condemn to death, those who purloin a few shillings of our property, injure any of our domestic animals, or even a growing twig; and shall we not make laws to restrain those who otherwise will not be restrained in their desire for gain, from robbing, in the pursuit of it, millions of our fellow creatures of their health, - their time for acquiring knowledge and future improvement, - of their social comforts, - and of every rational enjoyment? This system of proceeding cannot continue long; - it will work its own cure by the practical evils which it creates, and that in a most dangerous way to the public welfare, if the Government shall not give it a proper direction.

The public, however, are perhaps most interested in that part of the plan which recommends the training and educating of the lower orders under the direction and at the expense of the country. And it is much to be wished that the extended substantial advantages to be derived from this measure were more generally considered and understood, in order that the mistaken ideas which now exist regarding it, in the most opposite quarters, may be entirely removed.

A slight general knowledge of the past occurrences of the world, with some experience of human nature as it appears in the little sects and parties around us, is sufficient to make it evident to those, not very much misinstructed from infancy, that children may be taught any habits and any sentiments; and that these, with the bodily and mental propensities and faculties existing at birth in each individual, combined with the general circumstances in which he is placed, constitute the whole character of man.

It is thence evident that human nature can be improved and formed into the character which it is for the interest and happiness of all it should possess, solely by directing the attention of mankind to the adoption of legislative measures judiciously calculated to give the best habits and most just and useful sentiments to the rising generation; and in an especial manner to those who are placed in situations which, without such measures, render them liable to be taught the worst habits and the most useless and injurious sentiments.

I ask those who have studied the science of government upon those enlightened principles which alone ought to influence the statesman - What is the difference, in a national view, between an individual trained in habits which give him health, temperance, industry, correct principles of judging, foresight, and general good conduct; and one trained in ignorance, idleness, intemperance, defective powers of judging, and in general vicious habits? Is not one of the former of more real worth and political strength to the state than many of the latter?

Are there not many millions in the British dominions in whom this difference can be made? And if a change which so essentially effects the well-being of those individuals, and, through them, of every member of the empire, may be made, is it not the first duty of the government and the country to put into immediate practice the means which can effect the change?

Shall then such important measures be waived, and the best interests of this country compromised, because one party wishes its own peculiar principles to be forced on the young mind; or because another is afraid that the advantages to be derived from this improved system of legislation will be so great as to give too much popularity and influence to the Ministers who shall introduce it?

The termination of such errors in practice is, I trust, near at hand, and then Government will be no longer compelled to sacrifice the well-doing and the well-being of the great mass of the people and of the empire, to the prejudices of comparatively a few individuals, trained to mistake even their own security and interests.

Surely a measure most obviously calculated to render a greater benefit to millions of our fellow-creatures than any other ever yet adopted, cannot be much longer suspended because one party in the state may erroneously suppose it would weaken their influence over the public mind unless that party shall alone direct that plan; but which direction, it is most obvious, the intelligence of the age will not commit to any party exclusively. Or because others, trained in very opposite principles, may imagine that a national system of

education for the poor and lower orders, under the sanction of Government, but superintended and directed in its details by the country, would place a dangerous power in the hands of ministers of the Crown.

Such sentiments as these cannot exist in minds divested of party considerations, who sincerely desire to benefit their fellow-men, who have no private views to accomplish, and who wish to support and strengthen the Government, that the Government may be the better enabled to adopt decisive and effectual measures for the general amelioration of the people.

I now therefore, in the name of the millions of the neglected poor and ignorant, whose habits and sentiments have been hitherto formed to render them wretched, call upon the British Government and the British Nation to unite their efforts to arrange a system to train and instruct those who, for any good or useful purpose, are now untrained and uninstructed; and to arrest by a clear, easy, and practical system of prevention, the ignorance and consequent poverty, vice, and misery, which are rapidly increasing throughout the empire; for, 'Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.'

'1) 2nd edn 1817; 3rd edn 1818; 4th edn 1819; another edn 1841; reprinted in Owen, *The New Existence of Man Upon the Earth* (1854), pt 1, pp. i-iv, and Owen, *Life*, vol. IA (1858), pp. 3545. Later reprints include 1927, 1977, 1991. In subsequent edns, 'of New Lanark' was omitted from the title. The 3rd edn added three letters, two on the employment of children in manufactories, addressed to the Earl of Liverpool (see *infra*, pp. 237-44), and to British Master Manufacturers (see *infra*, pp. 271-7); and the third on the union of churches and schools, addressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury (for the latter, see *infra*, pp. 245-9).

2) 55 Geo. III. c. 26 (1815), prohibiting all imports of wheat when the domestic price fell below 80% per quarter.