

The Evolution of Industry

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IF Rome were not built in a day, what can be said of the great fabric of modern industry? That certainly is not a product of mushroom-like growth. Rather is it the result of centuries of development, and of the operations of forces which have transformed continents, annihilated distances, and brought well-nigh the whole world under contribution for the purpose of supplying the means whereby those forces can continue to operate. It is perhaps more necessary today than ever that industrial workers should realise how industry has repeatedly changed its form, because there appears to be a tendency to regard present day changes as being of a character separate and distinct from anything that has gone before, and as something in the nature of a movement from a fixed condition of things to a state of fluidity and uncertainty. It would be much more correct to regard the present changes as a continuation of past movements, directly connected with and related to all past development.

It is not possible for us to draw a straight line down the pages of the story of the evolution of industry and to say that development has followed precisely that line and no other. There have been too many wanderings from the path for this to be possible. Too much going over the same ground again, and too many hold-ups and temporary setbacks have taken place, due mainly to the actions of vested interests which from time to time have endeavoured—always in the end without success—to preserve the status quo and to prevent new and striving interests from coming into their own. Similarly it is not possible for the growth of industry to be considered apart from political development. Movements of note in industry have produced new economic classes that, either in town administration, or in national assembly, have used every means that came to their hands for the purpose of maintaining their own supremacy, clinging, even when their day was done to that last refuge of an economically useless class—the political machine. But, in spite of all this, it is possible for a general statement to be made of the lines along which industrial development has proceeded, and for its history to be divided into four periods:—

1. Family Industry—Ending about the middle of the 12 century.
2. Handicraft Industry—From the 12th to the 15th centuries.
3. Domestic Industry—From the 15th to the 18th centuries.
4. Factory Industry—From the 18th Century to the present day.

None of these historical periods can be clearly marked off from the period preceding or following it. How intermingled they are is evidenced by the existence today, side by side with the most modern and up-to-date machine-operated manufactory, of the small jobbing craftsman working up his own materials and selling them, and, of that other industrial anachronism, the worker who takes his customer's raw materials into his own home, works them up into what is required, and is paid for the labour he expends. These survivals of a past age are out of their true economic element, but they are typical of what was at one time the prevailing mode.

Family Industry.

Each productive system is distinguished as a system by the degree of specialisation attained and by the extent of the market that could be supplied. The essential features of Family Industry were that specialisation was practically unknown and that the market, if there was any market in the real sense, was purely the exchanging of products between people who were personally connected. Each family was a self-contained economic unit. The various members of the family circle tilled the soil, gathered in the crops, tended the sheep, prepared the wool

and made the clothes for their own immediate use. The crops were scanty, the sheep poor, and the clothing rough and coarse, it is true, but the means at the disposal of the people did not permit of a high standard of quality being reached, and there was little incentive to alter the methods of production, even if the knowledge had been there, which certainly was not the case. Custom ruled over all activities, and things were judged from the standpoint of what had been. Any goods that were not required by the family and could be dispensed with in favour of others of more immediate usefulness, were exchanged within the narrow limits of the village, by the process of barter, that cumbersome form of exchange which required not merely that the seller must find a buyer who would purchase what he had to sell, but that he must find a buyer who would make his purchase with goods the seller required. Without money to facilitate the exchange of products, and without a free movement of the people (the Feudal system with its serf-basis and the absence of means of communication between various parts of the country prevented real freedom of movement) trade and industry were bound to keep within very narrow limits. But as the means of producing food improved, it became possible for some members of the household—the most adept members—to give more of their time to special forms of productive activity, and, almost imperceptibly, within the old form there came into existence a body of handicraft workers, the heralds of a new system and the destroyers of the old. The beginnings of a money economy, the visits of foreign merchants bringing with them the vision of a world wider than that circumscribed by the narrow confines of the village, and the agricultural movements which tended—but only in a very small way—to give the enterprising individual greater scope for developing, all helped along the movement, and broke down the family and village organisation which had become too narrow to contain the forces within it.

Handicraft Industry.

Handicraft industry, as a productive system, though growing out of the family form of production, was yet a long way in advance of it. It needed a form of specialisation wide enough to allow of the existence of men engaged almost wholly in industry and dependent upon the agricultural community for food. It needed also a body of merchants to find markets for the greater volume of goods that the specialisation made possible. Goods were no longer produced to satisfy purely local needs, but for sale in a wider market. The merchants—chiefly foreign—travelled from village to village, met the handicraftsmen at the fairs and markets, took their produce to London or to more distant markets, and brought with them the products of the Far East and of the Mediterranean cities. (The fair of St. Ives was noted in the 12th Century as a centre for the sale of hides, wool and silk; the fair of St. Giles, Winchester, was noted about the same period as being the centre for traffic between France and England; the fair of Stourbridge, in the 13th Century, for embroidery and silk, and so on.) These market centres, it need hardly be said, became the nucleus of many a new town. Merchants settled there, and craftsmen either stayed where they were while the town grew up round them, or they moved to the trading centres and made their homes in districts to which their craft gave the name. The new towns were hampered by the exactions of the Feudal lords who levied toll upon them to such an extent that the merchants whose economic interests were affected were obliged to contend from time to time against them, and were forced to bring pressure to bear upon the central authority in order that greater freedom could be secured. More than one town gained its freedom because a needy king was in want of money and was prepared to sell charters to the mer-

chants who could pay for them. The need for combination amongst those whose interests were identical and who, by combined effort, could achieve what otherwise they would have failed to accomplish, forced the merchants to form those organisations which did so much to build up the towns of the Middle Ages—the Merchant Guilds. The merchants became the leading men in the towns, and though their guilds were distinct from the organs of town administration, they were yet closely connected with them. The leading men in the guilds were almost always also the aldermen of the towns, and they provide us with many an excellent object lesson of how economically powerful groups have, from time to time, gained control over administrative and legislative assemblies, because best noted. Parliament at that time counted for little, if any, more than any of those local regulatory bodies. Indeed, it was only one of a number of organisations which attempted to legislate and control.

When the merchants had secured their freedom and their trading rights, they began to use their power for the purpose of keeping back others who came into competition with them. They refused to allow the craftsmen to take part in trade, their guilds became exclusive and oligarchic, and craftsmen who were members were not allowed a voice in determining the policy of the Guild. The craftsmen, therefore, in their own interests, were forced to form their own organizations, and to struggle for their place in the sun, in the same way that the merchants had struggled for their freedom against the authority and domination of the Feudal lords. Thus did one set of vested interests compete against another, revolutionary when looking ahead, but reactionary when its object was achieved.

By the 14th Century the craftsmen had reached the height of their power. Their Craft Guilds had taken the place previously held by the Merchant Guilds; they dominated in town authority, and their influence was felt to some purpose in the National Assembly. But, like the merchants, when they had secured freedom for themselves, they were by no means anxious to allow others to be free. When oppressed, they were all for the overthrow of the existing order, but when they had secured their emancipation they too began to be restrictive and monopolistic. Produced as a class by economic development, in other words, by the growth of industry, they tried to hold back the very forces which had created them, but which did not cease operating with their emergence from obscurity. Trade and industry were fostered and helped by them. Their guilds regulated industry and framed rules which provided that good work should be done, that periods of apprenticeship should be served by all who entered the craft or "mystery," and which regulated the prices and conditions under which work should be sold. These regulations had for their main object the restriction of the number of people who could enter the particular industry with which the guild was connected, but they nevertheless placed industry upon a much sounder basis than it had hitherto occupied. But, as trade grew, as voyages of discovery opened up new markets and as agricultural changes loosened the manorial ties, the monopoly of the craftsmen was broken down. They did not give way without a struggle, however. By raising the entrance fees to the guilds, by enforcing longer periods of apprenticeship, by more stringent restrictions, such as compelling journeymen to declare that they would not "set up" for themselves and by means of political action, which took the form of Acts of Parliament prohibiting the setting up of industries except in the towns—where they were the dominant element—they sought to maintain their economic ascendancy. But forces were at work greater than they, forces against which they strove in vain. The

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