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[Review of the book *British Labour History, 1815-1914*]

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[Review of the book *British Labour History, 1815-1914*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] One of the most important issues in economic history is the effect of industrialization on workers' living standards and on the development of labor movements and class consciousness. Because Great Britain was the first nation to industrialize, the British workers have been a favorite topic among economic and social historians. Until now, however, there have been no textbooks covering all aspects of British labor history. E. H. Hunt has admirably filled this gap. His book deals with practically every topic of interest concerning British workers from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the beginning of World War I.

Keywords

Britain, Industrial Revolution, labor economics, labor history, nineteenth century

Disciplines

Economic History | Labor Economics | Labor History | Labor Relations | Regional Economics

Comments

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British Labour History, 1815-1914. By E. H. Hunt. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981. xiii, 428 pp. \$48.25 cloth.

One of the most important issues in economic history is the effect of industrialization on workers' living standards and on the development of labor movements and class consciousness. Because Great Britain was the first nation to industrialize, the British workers have been a favorite topic among economic and social historians. Until now, however, there have been no textbooks covering all aspects of British labor history. E. H. Hunt has admirably filled this gap. His book deals with practically every topic of interest concerning British workers from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the beginning of World War I.

British Labour History is divided into two parts of roughly equal length. Part I, entitled "The Labour Market, Incomes and Consumption," contains chapters on the distribution of the labor force, the growth of population, movements in living standards, poverty, and migration. Part II, "Working-Class Movements," is mainly concerned with the development of trade unionism, but also contains discussions of Owenism, Chartism, the reform movements of the 1830s, and the development of class consciousness. Hunt goes beyond the usual range of topics to discuss several important, yet often ignored topics. For instance, he devotes considerable attention to trends in the occupational distribution and wage rates of female workers, and even presents evidence concerning movements in male-female

wage differentials. He also analyzes the economic role of Irish and Jewish immigration, and attempts (somewhat unsuccessfully) to determine the effect of trade unionism on the salaries of union members and on the distribution of income between skilled and unskilled workers.

Hunt is at his best when discussing movements in workers' living standards. He presents an excellent (and unbiased) account of movements in real wages and the "quality of life" during the controversial period from 1780 to 1850. He adds succinct discussions of long-term changes in workers' diets, housing, and hours of work; and movements in occupational, regional, and sexual wage differentials.

Hunt's least successful chapter concerns poverty. His discussion of the extent and causes of poverty relies almost exclusively on the late nineteenth century local studies by Booth (1886) and Rowntree (1899). The massive amount of data on poor relief expenditures is virtually ignored, apparently because Hunt maintains that "far more suffered from poverty than ever applied to the boards of guardians" (p. 117). As a result, the book contains no discussion of the extent or causes of poverty in the first half of the nineteenth century. Given the current interest in the effects of industrialization on the working classes, this is a serious omission. Hunt's analysis of the administration of poor relief under the Old Poor Law is brief and out of date; it pays little attention to the numerous "revisionist" studies published since 1963. Even less space is devoted to the administration of relief under the New Poor Law. Hunt mentions the relative continuity of relief administration in the immediate post-amendment period, but he ignores the administration of relief during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Most of Hunt's conclusions reflect the mainstream of historical opinion (as might be expected from a textbook). A few of his most important conclusions, however, are questionable. Let me cite two examples. First, Hunt maintains that the rapid population growth during the period from 1750 to 1850 was largely exogenous to economic conditions. This assumption has important implications for Hunt's conclusions regarding the effect of industrialization on workers' living standards. Hunt blames the slow increase in real wages prior to 1850 on the rapid rate of population growth and the slow spread of industrialization across occupations (p. 112). It is, however, now generally accepted that the unprecedented increase in population during this period was in large part an endogenous response to economic growth. Moreover, Hunt's hypothesis concerning the effect of industrialization on

wage rates cannot explain the sharp divergence between the rate of increase in real wages (which he estimates to have been on the order of 25 percent between 1790 and 1850) and that of private consumption per capita (estimated by Feinstein to have been about 105 percent during the same period). The magnitude of this divergence suggests either that the rate of industrialization cannot be blamed for the relative stability of wage rates or that Hunt has significantly understated the rate of increase in real wages.

Second, Hunt maintains that "the effect of Irish immigration upon the pace of British industrialization was...not great" (p. 175). While most historians would probably agree that E. P. Thompson was incorrect in claiming that the Irish were "essential for the Industrial Revolution," Hunt has gone overboard in the other direction. He discounts the arguments of observers in the 1830s and 1840s (and later historians) that wage rates in the industrial cities would have been significantly higher in the absence of Irish immigration, and hence that profit rates, and the rate of capital accumulation, would have been lower. But, he presents no evidence to support his contention that increased internal migration could have replaced the Irish at little increased cost to urban employers.

I also have a few stylistic quibbles with the book. There is a general lack of tables and graphs to complement Hunt's analysis. Moreover, it is not always easy to determine which comments are generally accepted by historians and which are Hunt's opinions. Overall, however, this book is an excellent introduction to British labor history; it should seriously be considered for adoption as a text in courses on British (or European) labor and economic history. Unfortunately, this raises one last problem. The book is not currently available in paperback in the United States, and few professors will be willing to ask their students to pay \$48.25 for the hardback edition.

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The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-1960. By Ronald W. Schatz. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983. xv, 280 pp. \$22.95 cloth.

Ronald W. Schatz has written an engaging study that represents an advance in the "state-

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