

WHAT IS SWEATED INDUSTRY?

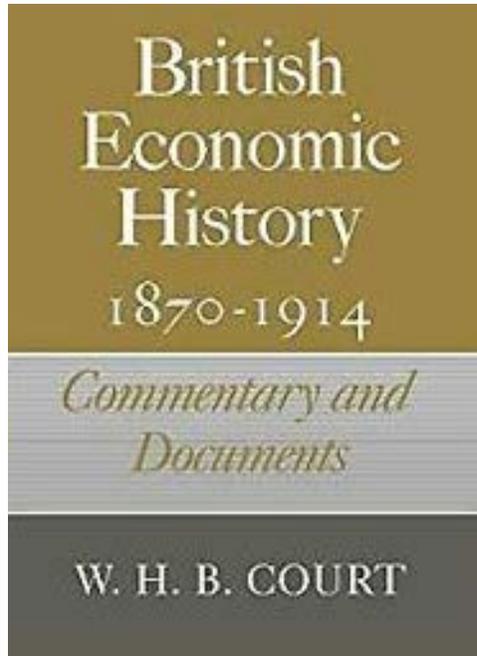
Source: 'Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System 1890' (1890), vol. XVII, paras. 5-6, 40-1, 91-3, 175-8.

Late in the 1880's, public opinion became excited about what were described as sweated trades. It appeared that in certain markets, for example, for matchboxes, clothes, chains, nails and cutlery, there was an easy supply of cheap labour, often that of married women, and a great demand for cheap goods. The result was to encourage employers to use the incessant competition of those seeking work to beat down prices. Extremely low wages and bad conditions of work were the consequence. Much of the work was done at home, in London and elsewhere, under conditions of domestic industry which had once been general. It was consequently out of the reach of the Factory Acts. It was also outside the limits of the trade unions, which found labour of this forlorn type quite unorganizable. Attention having been drawn by a report of the Board of Trade, Earl Dunraven moved in the House of Lords, 28 February 1888, for a select committee. No legislation followed the report of 1890, although Sydney Buxton proposed an amendment of the Factory Acts to cover part of the problem. For his proposals, see S. and B. Webb, 'Problems of Modern Industry' (1898: new edition 1902), pp. 152-5. There was nothing new about the industrial conditions investigated by the committee. The description of domestic industry in the Black Country may be compared with Disraeli's 'Sybil' (1845) a generation earlier.

Tailoring: (1) London

Every cause which tends to produce and perpetuate sweating is at work in the most concentrated form in the clothing trades. In reference to those trades, therefore, we have found it necessary to take a large body of evidence, much of which is of the greatest interest and importance.

It is stated that some years ago a tailor, who was properly trained in his calling, could make either a complete suit of clothes, or any part of it: he knew his business throughout. Sweating has been known for 50 years. The parcelling out of work must have had its origin in the fact that the journeyman tailor took his work home to be done by himself, and possibly by other members of his family. There were obviously advantages to the journeyman tailor and employer in this arrangement. There was little subdivision, the tailor made the garments



*British Economic History 1870-1914.*  
*Commentary and Documents.*  
W.H.B Court, 1965, pp. 385-389

from end to end; the only subdivision then being that the least important part of the work was put into the hands of the workmen's own apprentices. In the opinion of many witnesses the gradual lapse of the system of thorough apprenticeship increases the sweating, and is extremely prejudicial to the interest of trade and to the public. Now, excepting in the very best bespoke trade, a man generally confines himself to one particular kind of garment, or to a certain portion only of a garment, the making of which is easily learnt. Now, instead of the thoroughly practical tailor being employed, the trade is divided into different sections. There are foremen or cutters, basters, machinists, fellers, buttonholers, pressers, and general workers, one witness indeed stating that there were 25 subdivisions. 'Sub-division is so minutely carried out that a man who can press a coat cannot necessarily press a waistcoat, and a waistcoat presser is equally unqualified to press trousers. If the labour was not so much subdivided there would not be half the evils connected with sweating.' This is borne out by Mr Burnett, Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade. 'Except for the best kinds of clothing, the old-fashioned tailor has been crushed out; and although for the highly skilled man the rates of remuneration may be as high, or higher than before,' (and this high remuneration is shown to exist), 'the great bulk of the cheap clothing is in the hands of a class who are not tailors at all in the old sense of the term;' the trade is governed by no rules at all, at least as regards the lower grades; the hours are anything a sweater likes to make them; each sweater has his own method of engaging and paying his workers. The question as to what is a day, or half a day, is differently interpreted by different masters. It is the usual thing for seven and a half, eight, and nine hours to be regarded as half a day. . . .

*Chain and nail-making*

These industries do not give employment to a great number of persons, but in scarcely any that have come under our notice is so much poverty to be found, combined with such severe work and so many hardships. We have taken a great deal of evidence in regard to the circumstances of the people, and we now proceed to give a summary of the more important of the facts that have been brought before us. Some general information was furnished by Mr R. Juggins,

secretary of the Midland Counties Trades Federation, which consists of a combination of trade societies, such as the chain-makers, nail-makers, rivet-makers, and other workers in iron. Chain-making is carried on chiefly at Cradley Heath, and in villages comprised within an area of three or four miles. It is a small industry, not more than from two to three thousand persons being engaged in it. The larger descriptions of chains, known as cable chains, are made in factories; block chains, cart-horse back bands, dog-chains, and other smaller kinds are made in the district, in small shops attached to the home of the workers. In most cases there is a workshop at the back of the house, fitted up with an anvil, a stone block, and other appliances. The occupier of the shop may let it out, wholly or in part, to four or five other persons. A shop of the kind described, with a dwelling-house attached to it, lets from 3s. to 3s. 6d. a week.

The business is carried on in this way: the worker receives a certain weight of iron, and he has to return a corresponding weight of chain, less an allowance, which is, or ought to be, four pounds in the bundle weighing half a hundredweight, for the waste in working. It is stated that workmen can occasionally save some iron out of the allowance for waste, which they work up on their own account, and sell to 'foggers' at low rates, to the general detriment of the trade. One of the most common charges, however, brought by the workers is, that the necessary weight for waste is not allowed them, and consequently they are unable to return the requisite weight of chain.

The sweater in these trades is known as the 'fogger'. He goes to the master, takes out the work, and distributes it among the men and women. When it is done he takes it back to the master. Sometimes the fogger works himself, but more frequently he acts merely as a go-between. It is also stated in evidence that the workpeople are compelled in many cases to buy the provisions and other things they require at the fogger's shop, or at a shop kept by his relations or friends; in fact, that he manages to get the workers into his power, and obliges them to deal at his shop, under the penalty of refusing to give them work. When the fogger has a shop, the prices he charges for his wares are said to be of an exorbitant character. For American bacon, which an ordinary tradesman sells for 5½d. a pound, they charge 8d.; for sugar they make their customers pay a halfpenny per pound above

the usual price; for tea they charge more by 50 per cent than other shops. It is also stated that the fogger does not always wait for orders, but sends in articles to the men, which they are compelled to take, for fear of losing their work.

...we are of opinion that, although we cannot assign an exact meaning to 'sweating', the evils known by that name are shown in the foregoing pages of the Report to be—

1. A rate of wages inadequate to the necessities of the workers or disproportionate to the work done.
  2. Excessive hours of labour.
  3. The insanitary state of the houses in which work is carried on.
- These evils can hardly be exaggerated.

The earnings of the lowest classes of workers are barely sufficient to sustain existence.

The hours of labour are such as to make the lives of the workers periods of almost ceaseless toil, hard and often unhealthy.

The sanitary conditions under which the work is conducted are not only injurious to the health of the persons employed, but are dangerous to the public, especially in the case of the trades concerned in making clothes, as infectious diseases are spread by the sale of garments made in rooms inhabited by persons suffering from small-pox and other diseases.

When we come to consider the causes of and remedies for the evils attending the conditions of labour which go under the name of sweating, we are immediately involved in a labyrinth of difficulties. First, we are told that the introduction of sub-contractors or middlemen is the cause of the misery. Undoubtedly, it appears to us that employers are regardless of the moral obligations which attach to capital when they take contracts to supply articles and know nothing of the condition of the workers by whom such articles are made, leaving to a sub-contractor the duty of selecting the workers and giving him by way of compensation a portion of the profit. But it seems to us that the middleman is the consequence, not the cause of the evil; the instrument, not the hand which gives motion to the instrument, which does the mischief. Moreover, the middleman is found to be absent in many cases in which the evils complained of abound.

Further, we think that undue stress has been laid on the injurious

effect on wages caused by foreign immigration, inasmuch as we find that the evils complained of obtain in trades, which do not appear to be affected by foreign immigration.

We are of opinion, however, that certain trades are, to some extent, affected by the presence of poor foreigners, for the most part Russian and Polish Jews. These Jews are not charged with immorality or with vice of any description, though represented by some witnesses as being uncleanly in their persons and habits. On the contrary, they are represented on all hands as thrifty and industrious, and they seldom or never come on the rates, as Jews support by voluntary contributions all their indigent members. What is shown is that the Jewish immigrants can live on what would be starvation wages to Englishmen, that they work for a number of hours almost incredible in length, and until of late they have not easily lent themselves to trade combinations.

Machinery, by increasing the sub-division of labour, and consequently affording great opportunities for the introduction of unskilled labour is also charged with being a cause of sweating. The answer to this charge seems to be, that in some of the larger clothing and other factories, in which labour is admitted to be carried on under favourable conditions to the workers, machinery, and sub-division of labour to the greatest possible extent, are found in every part of the factory.

With more truth it may be said that the inefficiency of many of the lower classes of workers, early marriages, and the tendency of the residuum of the population in large towns to form a helpless community, together with a low standard of life and the excessive supply of unskilled labour, are the chief factors in producing sweating. Moreover, a large supply of cheap female labour is available in consequence of the fact that married women working at unskilled labour in their homes, in the intervals of attendance on their domestic duties and not wholly supporting themselves, can afford to work at what would be starvation wages to unmarried women. Such being the conditions of the labour market, abundant materials exist to supply an unscrupulous employer with workers helplessly dependent upon him.