

Notes on THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

[by G.D.H. Cole]

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- Note 1. Chapter 6, last page. I agree that there was a blind faith in progress in certain directions, but there was also a very great conservatism in others. England remained 'snob' to a quite remarkable extent through the economic transformation.
- Note 2. ditto. I found the transition to this sentence from the preceding paragraph very difficult to follow.
- Note 3. Chapter 7, page 3, "make a living by doing nothing". But could he? I agree that he could make a living by working at a very slack pace but not without working.
- Note 4. Chapter 7, page 4. I think that all through this chapter you treat Speenhamland as much more universal than it was, and also make much too light of county differences in wage policy. There was a very great difference in the changes in agricultural wages from county to county during the Speenhamland period, with consequent differences in the aid given to wages out of the rates. See, for such figures as are available, particularly Bowley's Wages in the 19th century.
- Note 5. Chapter 7, page 5, "safe from hunger". But was he safe from hunger - from starvation, yes, or nearly so, but from hunger certainly not, at any rate after 1815.
- Note 6. Chapter 7, page 6. Why refer to the Luddites here? A reference to the agricultural machine smashers would surely be much more pertinent - the attacks on threshing machines, for example, in 1830.
- Note 7. Chapter 7, page 7. I feel that this passage under-estimates the extent of the wage labour force in agriculture - I mean of those who had practically no land of their own and worked almost entirely for wages.
- Note 8. ditto. I don't believe the Combination Laws of 1799 and 1800 had anything whatsoever to do with Speenhamland. There were no combinations in the agricultural areas as far as I know before 1834 - except some purely political combinations in the Eastern Counties in the 1790's - and I do not believe Speenhamland relief was paid to any extent in aid of industrial wages except as a form of unemployment relief in certain of the industrial counties, notably the East Midlands and parts of Lancashire, between 1815 and 1834. I think a great deal of what you write suggests that industrial as well as agricultural wages were normally added out of the rates, but I know of no evidence for this view. Again and again, when you bracketed Speenhamland and the Combination Laws, I felt you were just plain wrong. The real link is between the Combination Laws and the repressive legislation passed against seditious meetings and unlawful societies in the 1790's as a consequence of governing class panic over the French Revolution.

This caused what was originally a Bill directed against specific combinations among the millwrights to be generalised by Pitt and Wilberforce into an Anti-Combination Law providing for more summary justice against all combinations.

- Note 9. Chapter 7, page 8. Did the Trade Union legislation of the 1870's offer sufficient protection? Perhaps it did in the skilled crafts, but the unskilled hardly got organised except for a very brief spell in the early 'seventies until after the Dock Strike of 1889.
- Note 10. Chapter 7, page 10, "Not before 1834" etc. Frankly, this strikes me as monstrous exaggeration. I think there was a highly competitive labour market in the coal fields and in the textiles areas long before - that is over most of the field in which the Industrial Revolution was then operating.
- Note 11. Same page, two lines down. This reverses the order. The Factory Act of 1833 - to say nothing of that of 1819, - came before the Poor Law Act of 1834, and the great rise of Trade Unionism had begun in the middle and late 'twenties. Even the great Owenite Union was practically over before the Poor Law was passed. This is all out of drawing.
- Note 12. Chapter 8, page 1. You refer to the Law of Settlement later, but I should have mentioned it here.
- Note 13. Same page. It was disputable whether wage assessments were discontinued in the 18th century as much as you suggest. Certainly, they continued in a number of counties, and the question is rather how much notice was taken of them. This is still largely an unexplored field, as it would involve a minute search of county records.
- Note 14. Chapter 8, page 4. The Settlement Acts were not completely withdrawn - not by any means. They were a great nuisance later in the 19th century.
- Note 15. Chapter 8, page 5. This raises a big point. My view is that Speenhamland was essentially a war measure, designed to avoid the necessity for adjusting wages to war prices on the assumption that the war would not last long. It then perpetuated itself because the war did last long, and serious dislocation arose out of it. You practically don't mention the war, or the wartime rise of prices, in connection with your explanation of Speenhamland, and I think you are just wrong.
- Note 16. Chapter 8, page 6. Surely they had every reason to link it with the war and with war prices?
- Note 17. Chapter 8, page 11. Surely, you should notice the influence of the war on enclosures. Most unfortunately, most of the commentators on enclosures take no account of the difference between war and peace conditions and give their figures of enclosures so as to

comprehend war and peace periods together, but the great point is that the war gave an enormous fillip to enclosure for arable.

- Note 18. Chapter 8, page 11, "family earnings". Weren't these mainly industrial earnings, and was not the disappearance of the cottage industry one big factor in depressing agricultural conditions?
- Note 19. Chapter 8, page 13. If you have not read Henry Fielding's book on the Causes of the late Increase of Robbers, you should. It is a long time before Townsend, and it throws a great deal of light on the 18th century attitude towards the labouring poor.
- Note 20. Chapter 8, page 14, "agriculture could not compete with town wages". Is this true in the North, where agriculture did compete, though it doubtless lost people to the towns. As far as I know, wages were seldom supplemented in the North out of Poor Rates. agricultural
- Note 21. Chapter 8, page 18. Was the parish the "final unit" in the Gilbert's Act areas?
- Note 22. Chapter 8, page 19. Beware of the suggestion that the ownership of landed property became concentrated in fewer hands in this period. The evidence is that it did not. I agree that farms did become consolidated, but ownership continued to be broken up through the investment of small savings in patches of landed property. See Davis's article in an early number of the Economic History Review.
- Note 23. Chapter 8, page 20, "if he was willing to employ a villager" - and also in some places even if he was unwilling. In Hampshire they billeted paupers on the farmers - much to Cobbett's annoyance.
- Note 24. Chapter 8, page 21, "By the 1820's" - i.e. after the peace, when inflated farming profits had fallen and the burden of the rates was more severely felt. Here again, you leave out the war, and I think falsify the argument in doing so.
- Note 25. Chapter 8, page 24. You assume here that the Speenhamland system existed in the industrial towns. I don't believe it did, save as an occasional measure in periods of abnormal distress. I think all this is out of drawing.
- Note 26. Chapter 8, page 25. You could find much useful material about the attitude to rate-aided wages in Cobbett's writings of the 1820's, mostly scattered through The Political Register. I think I could give you references, if you wanted them.
- Note 27. Chapter 8, page 27, "Their first great act of reform" - No, the Factory Act of 1833 came first.
- Note 28. Chapter 8, page 27, second paragraph. "No outdoor relief should be given" - I think you mean no outdoor relief to the able-bodied. I don't think they went quite so far as to wish to abolish all outdoor relief, though no doubt a few extremists did.

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- Note 29. Chapter 9, page 8. I think you are wrong about the Trades Union. The notion of a general Trades Union covering all trades by no means originated with Owen. It was mooted in Manchester and London in 1818, and Doherty actually tried to create it in 1830 - quite apart from Owen's influence. The G.N.C.T.U. was an attempt by the Owenites to bring together a number of attempts at general union made earlier. See my article in the Review of the International Institute of Social History, 1939, which I tried to show you the other day. It would doubtless be more convenient if events had happened in the order to fit your theory, but they didn't, nor can the G.N.C.T.U. itself be attributed to the new Poor Law.
- Note 30. Chapter 9, page 10. See also Fieldings's book already referred to.
- Note 31. Chapter 9, page 10. I object strongly to this description of Defoe, who was a much more complicated character than you suggest, and I think primarily a pioneer of Nonconformist middle-class practical economic thought rather than a time-serving journalist.
- Note 32. Chapter 10, page 11. I think Owen's ideas had been pretty fully formed before Place introduced him to Beller's's pamphlet. He had published all the essential features of his theory and of his practical proposals before he even read Bellers, who then I agree influenced him a good deal.
- Note 33. Chapter 9, page 12. Owen's beginnings were not 1818 but considerably earlier. His New View of Society, part I, was published in either 1812 or 1813 - I forget which - and his general views had been formed long before that. Even his public lectures in support of his plan were in 1817, and that was after his efforts to get the House of Commons to take action in 1816. Of course, his work at New Lanark was earlier still.
- Note 34. Chapter 10, page 7. I think you exaggerate the extent to which rural wages fluctuated in the 18th century. I should have thought that they remained stable to a considerable extent, even in face of fluctuating prices.
Page 8.
- Note 35. Surely Godwin ought to come in here? Malthus was primarily an answer to Godwin. Later on, you go out of your way to be rude to Godwin, and I think you are quite wrong. It no doubt suits your argument better to miss out Godwin and the whole optimistic philosophy arising out of the French Revolution at this point, but I think it vitiates your argument.
- Note 36. Chapter 10, page 9. The farming-out of parish apprentices in bulk did not begin in the cotton mills. It began, I think, in the older textile industries of the East Midlands and considerably antedated the Industrial Revolution.

- Note 37. Chapter 10, page 13. I don't agree that "knowledge of the general laws of nature was utterly useless" at this stage. What about the Davy's safety lamp, to take only one example? And chemistry was developed to a certain extent quite early - e.g. Libbig.
- Note 38. Chapter 10, page 17. I read this, though it was scratched through. I think you are quite wrong about Godwin.
- Note 39. Same page, bottom. Was Political Justice written to counter Burke? It seems to me quite an inadequate explanation of it.
- Note 40. Chapter 10, page 18, "the discontent of the labouring poor". I agree this is true in the main, but I don't think it is wholly true - e.g. in the Eastern Counties, particularly Norfolk.
- Note 41. Chapter 10, page 19. I think you are quite wrong about the Combination Laws, as I have said.
- Note 42. Notes on Sources, page 2. "~~sheltered from a dislocation caused not only by economic progress but also by the war, and, I should say, most of all by the war, as far as immediate consequences were concerned.~~"
- Note 43. The Literature of Speenhamland. Combination Laws - again, may I register strong dissent?
- Note 44. Cobbett certainly did not idealize the Old Poor Law. He ~~attacked it violently.~~ What he idealised was the mediaeval form of Poor Law relief. In attacking the New Poor Law, he was not defending the Old, and he was a bitter opponent of Speenhamland. ~~With some of the Chartistis it was, I agree, another matter.~~
- Note 45. "It was precisely its extension to the towns". Yes, but how far was it extended to the towns ~~except as a measure of relief for the unemployed and under-employed in exceptional years or of distress?~~ You think it was. I don't.
- Note 46. Wasn't it remembered by Carlyle in his Chartism?
- Note 47. Add Fielding's book already mentioned.
- Note 48. Surely, a good deal more of Owen's work should be mentioned, including his 1817 Speeches and his earlier Observations on the Manufacturing System and essays on TA: New View of Society.
- Note 49. Why not give Dorothy Marshall's book The Treatment of the Poor in 1870? *the eighteenth century*