

Disraeli on the Plight of the Handloom Weaver, 1845

(The social novels of the 1840's increased public awareness of the 'Condition of England Question,' among the middle and upper classes. Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81), who later became Conservative Prime Minister, wrote two social novels designed to reconcile the "two nations" of the rich and the poor by means of an alliance between the old aristocracy and the common people. Here he describes the plight of a handloom weaver who can no longer compete with factory production. Benjamin Disraeli. *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, 1845, Book 11, ch 13; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol.II, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 42-44.)

It was a single chamber of which he was the tenant. In the centre, placed so as to gain the best light which the gloomy situation could afford, was a loom. In two corners of the room were mattresses placed on the floor, a check curtain, hung upon a string if necessary, concealing them. In one was his sick wife; in the other, three young children: two girls, the eldest about eight years of age; between them their baby brother. An iron kettle was by the hearth, and on the mantelpiece, some candles, a few lucifer matches, two tin mugs, a paper of salt, and an iron spoon. In a farther part, close to the wall, was a heavy table or dresser; this was a fixture, as well as the form which was fastened by it.

The man seated himself at his loom; he commenced his daily task.

"Twelve hours of daily labour, at the rate of one penny each hour: and even this labour is mortgaged! How is this to end? Is it rather not ended?" And he looked around him at his chamber without resources: no food, no fuel, no furniture, and four human beings dependent on him, and lying in their wretched beds, because they had no clothes. 'I cannot sell my loom', lie continued, 'at the price of old firewood, and it cost me gold. It is not vice that has brought me to this, nor indolence, nor imprudence. I was born to labour, and I was ready to labour. I loved my loom, and my loom loved me. It gave me a cottage in my native village, surrounded by a garden, of whose claims on my solicitude it was not jealous. There was time for both. It gave me for a wife the maiden that I had ever loved; and it gathered my children round my hearth with plenteousness and peace. I was content: I sought no other lot. It is not adversity that makes me look back upon the past with tenderness.

"Then why am I here? Why am I, and six hundred thousand subjects of the Queen, honest, loyal, and industrious, why are we, after manfully struggling for years, and each year sinking lower in the scale, why are we driven from our innocent and happy homes, our country cottages that we loved, first to bide in close towns without comforts, and gradually to crouch into cellars, or find a squalid lair like this, without even the common necessities of existence; first the ordinary conveniences of life, then raiment, and, at length, food, vanishing from us.

"It is that the capitalist has found a slave that has supplanted the labour and ingenuity of man. Once he was an artisan: at the best, he now only watches machines; and even that occupation slips from his grasp, to the woman and the child. The capitalist flourishes, he amasses

immense wealth; we sink, lower and lower; lower than the beasts of burden; for they are fed better than we are, cared for more. And it is just, for according to the present system they are more precious. And yet they tell us that the interests of Capital and Labour are identical."