Child Labour:
The Experience of Today’s Advanced Economies and Lessons from the Past

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Introduction
Fifty years ago it could reasonably have been assumed that just as child labour had declined in the developed world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so it would eventually disappear in the rest of the world. But child labour has not faded away. Endemic in today’s poor countries, it seems also to have re-emerged in developed countries, raising questions about its importance in national and regional economies and in family economic strategies (for estimates of child labour today see ILO LABPROJ database; for the developed world see Lavalette, 1999). Historians have encountered child labour in a wide variety of social and economic contexts. What have they learned that may help development economists?

The paper begins with an overview of the extent and location of child labour in the past. Doubts remain about time trends and it may not be possible to say with confidence whether the era of proto-industry or the early factories saw the high water mark of child labour. The nature and time path of decline is also still debated. Historians must rely on a quantitative record that is patchy and difficult to interpret. Nonetheless it is possible to identify broad trends against which the purported causes of child labour can be explored. Four kinds of explanation of child labour are on offer. The first focuses on developments within the capitalist labour markets, extended beyond a discussion of technology to include managerial and trade union strategies vis a vis children’s work. The second focuses on the parental decision to send children to work. In historical analyses choice theoretic approaches become discussions of family strategies and converge with the broader literature on parent-child relations. In economic analyses interest is in the possibility of divergent interests within households and, if parents make decisions for children, the potential for agency problems with implications for under-investment in children’s human capital creating a case for intervention. Both historians and economists confront the question whether parents are altruistic or selfish with respect to their children and ask whether child labour always follows from parental selfishness or whether there are conditions in which children would be sent out to work by caring parents. The third kind of explanation relates to the legal and political stance of the state.
Was child labour discouraged or was the state complicit or at least compliant? The fourth focuses attention on social norms, cultural values and beliefs about appropriate behaviour.

Two neglected aspects of children’s work in the past resound in the modern world. The first is the importance within the child labour force of orphans and the fatherless. Such children lacked the economic support and emotional protection of parents and were at the forefront of exploitation. Without a strong state, able and willing to act in loco parentis, these children were particularly vulnerable. Poor countries today, like many past societies contain many orphans and children living outside conventional family structures or in families headed by women. Without fiscal transfers children in such families are condemned to poverty. Unless the deadly potential for children’s wellbeing embedded in these circumstances is recognized and policies designed to reach them, their future is grim. The second neglected theme is related to the first: the role of war in promoting children’s work. It is often forgotten that Britain, for example, industrialized at the same time that it undertook the first mass mobilization. War increased the numbers of children who lacked the protection of a working father. It created booms and busts in different sectors of the economy and disrupted labour markets, stripping out what might have been children’s traditional ports of entry and requiring they be thrown in headlong. There were even battalions of boy soldiers formed, an ugly reminder that there is nothing new under the sun.

The extent of child labour in the past

The foundational issue concerns the extent of child labour in past societies. How widespread and important was children’s work? An important related question is where did children work? Were they concentrated in particular jobs or widely diffused throughout the economy to be found in most occupations and sectors? How important were they to the industries in which they were involved and how much did they contribute to economic growth and development? Investigating the quantitative importance of children’s work involves difficult conceptual problems. How is work to be
defined and what age groups constitute childhood? Moreover measuring children’s work is particularly difficult for historians who often face a patchy and even misleading quantitative record. The following summary supplements the evidence from early censuses and industrial surveys with material from less conventional sources such as household budgets and working-class autobiographies.

The earliest censuses in the now advanced economies came too late to capture the extent of child labour during industrialization. They measured a phenomenon already in decline and undercounted child workers especially outside the child intensive industries such as textiles. Thus in 1851 when the British census first recorded the occupations of young people 97 per cent of children aged 5-9 were without a ‘specified occupation’ and from 1881 the census no longer bothered to count working children in this age group. But by 1851, the industrial revolution as conventionally dated was already 71 years old and child labour had been the subject of (albeit imperfect) regulation, for 49 years since the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act in 1802. Not surprisingly then few very young children were recorded as occupied though child labour for children aged 10-14 was still very much evident. The first relevant American and French censuses were not until the very end of the nineteenth century by which point they too recorded few young children at work.

For the era of industrialization, historians must rely on industrial surveys, household data and other anecdotal and fragmentary evidence. What do such sources suggest about the trends and distribution of children’s work?

Child labour was important in early industrialization when large-scale production was a novelty and especially so in textiles and mining. It was particularly important to the early starters on the path of industrial progress, notably Britain, Belgium, France, the Western parts of Prussia and the United States. For these early starters the intensive use of child labour in the key sectors of the industrial revolution was superimposed on children’s employment in proto-industry and occurred in a cultural setting pre-disposed to “making children useful”. The reduced wage costs must have played a role in the competitiveness
of the key industries in the industrial revolution though no counterfactual study exists to chart the exact contribution that they made to industrial success.

A recent survey of the evidence relating to industry and mining in Great Britain (Tuttle, 1999) revealed astonishingly high relative employment levels of children (aged under 13) and young people (aged 13-18) in both textiles and coal mining in the early nineteenth century. Children and young people made up between one third and two thirds of all workers in many textile mills in 1833 and regularly over one quarter in many mines in 1842. Although Britain was exceptional in the intensity of its children’s work, the evidence for other early industrializers shows that child labour was not uncommon. An industrial enquiry of 1839-1843 in France found 143,665 child workers under the age of 16, equivalent to 12.1 per cent of the labour force (Heywood, 1988). Another, but not necessarily comparable inquiry for Belgium in 1843 counted 10, 514 child workers, or 19.5 per cent of the work force (de Herdt, 1996). Goldin and Sokoloff (1982) estimate that in the north-eastern states of the US women and children made up about 40 per cent of the manufacturing labour force by 1832.

Household budgets collected for Britain from the pre-census era provide further evidence that industrialization was associated with a boom in child labour (Horrell and Humphries, 1995). They suggest that while children’s contributions were always important it was in the central period of the British industrial revolution, in the 1820s and 1830s, that their participation rates were highest. According to this source child participation rates exceeded those recorded in the mid-Victorian censuses (although of course the census covered all children and the household budgets only children in working-class families).

Evidence from working-class autobiographies also suggests an increase in child participation rates in Britain when comparing the end of the eighteenth century with the early and mid nineteenth century (Humphries, 2003c). The differences were felt by boys aged nine through thirteen who were more likely to work if born after 1790 than before and more likely still to work if born after 1820 than before. In contrast only a small proportion of five, six and seven year-olds worked in both the late eighteenth and early
nineteenth century and boys aged 14 and over were almost always at work whether it was early or late on in the industrial revolution.

Child labour was strategically crucial to the transition to factory production. Domestic industry and mining absorbed significant proportions of the child labor force, but it was children’s employment in factories that increased dramatically (Horrell and Humphries, 1995; see also Galbi, 1997). Similarly US household data for the end of the nineteenth century, while confirming the general importance of children’s contributions to family incomes, also underlines the higher employment probabilities for children of textile workers than children of men in other industries (Goldin and Parsons, 1989). Autobiographical evidence for Britain, again extending into the pre-census period, confirms the young working of the children of factory workers (Humphries, 2003a). As population and employment in the factory districts grew dramatically in the early stages of the industrial revolution, this drove up the absolute number of children in work and the aggregate child participation rate.

Child labour in the early factories was given particularly lurid dimensions in the British case because it was associated with an apparently large scale and long-distance movement of pauper apprentices, children in the care of the state, who were bound to work in isolated water-powered mills (Dunlop, 1912). Further drama was added by revelations of cruel and punishing work and living regimes for these wards of the state. This was the background to the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act in 1802, the first legal protection afforded to child workers (Engerman, 2003 forthcoming). Orphaned and abandoned children also figured in the early factory labour force in France (Chassagne, 1986) and Japan (Saito, 1996). In eighteenth-century America the institution of pauper apprenticeship also conveyed thousands of destitute and abandoned children into the labour force, though most of these were destined for agriculture and trades rather than factories (Murray and Herndon, 2002).

The importance of child labour in the early mills and mines of the industrial revolution should not obscure its presence in other sectors and industries such as agriculture,
miscellaneous manufacturing, and services even though here it might be more difficult to extract from the historical record. Analysis of first job from autobiographical evidence shows factory work was not by any means the only source of employment or of employment for very young workers (Humphries, 2003c; Maynes, 1995). Child labour was entrenched through the economy in traditional sectors and small-scale production units as well as factories and mines. Very common first jobs included winding bobbins in hand-loom weaving, errand and messenger boys in services, delivery boys in distribution, and bird scarers, plough-boys and shepherds in agriculture. Moreover children are also found in a variety of factory jobs outside cotton and wool. They were important in silk, bricks and small-scale metal manufactures and in garments and footwear. Nor is it clear from the autobiographies that the intensity or harshness of work was necessarily less in these more traditional first jobs than in the factories or mines.

Not only were children widely involved in economic activities, the most recent evidence also suggests that their involvement persisted well on into the nineteenth century. It was not a transitory characteristic of the “first phase” as some historians have suggested (Nardinelli, 1990). Thus Tuttle (1999) notes that in all British textile industries the proportion of the work force under 18 was close to 50 per cent for the entire period from 1835 to 1850, long after the initial phase of factory production when rural water-driven mills had relied on child paupers. These figures relate to textile industries generally and not just to cotton. Indeed cotton employed the lowest percentage of non-adults after 1835 while worsted and silk mills employed the highest. In addition children were present in the majority of mines from 1800 to 1850 and although their relative importance varied, they often represented between 20 and 50 per cent of all workers. This evidence is consistent with the suggestion from the autobiographies that it was only the cohort born after 1850 (and therefore starting work in the 1860s) that was able to delay entry into the labour force.

Thus although children’s participation was not sustained at the levels characteristic of the crucible of the industrial revolution there was no rapid disappearance. Child labour was not
some dinosaur of the era, perfectly adapted to early industrial conditions but then driven rapidly to extinction when times changed.

The decline of child labour began in Britain and other early starters around 1850. Census evidence for Britain documents a gradual decline. As with the boom in child labour which had affected young but not the youngest children disproportionately, the withdrawal of child workers was also structured by age. The youngest child workers aged 5-9, never very common in the labour force, were the first to go and had already disappeared by the time of modern census enumeration. The withdrawal of children aged 10-14 came later but accelerated after 1870. Thirty per cent of children in this age group had been occupied in 1851 but only 17 per cent were by 1901 (Lavalette, 1999). This withdrawal of children in sequence by age represents the first stage in the “adulting” of the labour force as Cunningham (2000) calls it. The systematic undercounting of child workers in the censuses of the mid-nineteenth century means the trend decline if anything is underestimated. Similarly when the US census finally counted child workers at the end of the nineteenth century it found only 17 per cent of those aged 10-14 were gainfully employed (Trattner, 1970). And when the French did so in 1896 only 20 per cent were occupied (Heywood, 1988). Most of the working children in this age band would have been 13 or 14. The era of extensive child labour was over.

Superimposed on the disappearance of young children from the labour force was a redistribution of those older children who remained economically active. By the late nineteenth century children in the advanced economies no longer participated in the key industries in which they had been so important. But just as their importance in these key sectors has been over-played in the standard accounts so the retreat is perhaps presented too cleanly. Like most retreats it was ragged and uneven (Winstanley, 1995).

Children also began to be less commonly seen in those miscellaneous manufacturing industries where their presence was also important albeit overshadowed by the child-intensity of textile production. Nor were they involved in the newer industries developing in the early twentieth century and the inter-war years. But the retreat of
children from industry did not signal the death knell of child labour. Rather children removed to as Cunningham describes it “a distinct and marginalized children’s labour market” (Cunningham, 2000, p.409).

Even in textiles and in mining, in the heyday of child labour, children had distinct children’s jobs (but see Tuttle, 1999). In this sense there had always been a segmented labour market but it was a segmented labour market within key industries. By the early twentieth century children had been excluded from such industries and were increasingly confined to the service sector and to jobs that were exclusive to children. Thus by the 1911 census in Britain over one-quarter of employed boys under 15 were messenger boys. As Cunningham notes this was work that was not only exclusive to children but was also marginal to the economy (2000, p. 413). It is important not to over-emphasize this transition. Earlier censuses had also recorded large numbers of messenger boys (Booth, 1886) and they are just as ubiquitous in the autobiographies, where 36 such boys were recorded representing 7.1 per cent of the 506 boys whose first job was known. After farm boy it was the most commonly recorded job. However there is no doubt that this shift represents a distinct and important second stage in the “adulting” of the labour force and one not confined to the vanguard economies. In Norway in 1875 children had worked in such industries as agriculture, tobacco and glass manufacture. But by 1912 their role had been restricted and they were mainly to be found as newspaper boys (Schrumpf, 1997). By the twentieth century much of children’s work was part-time and so not incompatible with school attendance. As half-timers in the mills they clung on in a traditional industrial job but most part-timers were again in the service sector working in shops, delivering goods and running errands.

One final lesson is to resist seeing the British experience, since it was first and has been thoroughly investigated, as typical. Just such a mistake was made in historical understanding of industrialization itself. First thought a paradigm case, more recent work has revealed the British industrial revolution to be shot through with peculiarities (Crafts, 1985). One such peculiarity is the extent and intensity of the use of child labour, which was greater in Britain than in any other nineteenth century industrializer or indeed poor
country today. Belgium, significantly another early industrializer whose transition was heavily based on coal and textiles, the same “leading sectors” as the British industrial revolution, comes a distant second (De Herdt, 1996). Figure 1 below (reproduced from Humphries, 2003b) compares the proportion of children at work in Britain at various levels of per capita income with analogous estimates from the Third World. The 1870 figure is the census estimate for boys in England and Wales in 1871. While the historical observations are very rough because of the difficulties of measuring both child participation and converting nineteenth century income levels into 1992 US dollars, the gap between Britain and today’s underdeveloped countries is sufficiently wide as to dominate the likely effects of computational errors. The greater use of child labour in the British case complements current re-interpretations of the industrial revolution itself as involving at least in its early stages an increase in labour input, “an industrious revolution”, rather than an increase in productivity (Crafts, 1985; De Vries, 1995; Voth, 2000). Perhaps the evidence on children’s work will help historians to discriminate between the different explanations of the increased industriousness and so illuminate the industrial revolution itself.

**Figure 1 Child labour in the British industrial revolution in context**

**Child Labour and GDP per capita**

GDP per capita (1992 US dollars),
Source: Krueger 1997; Horrell and Humphries, 1995;
Humphries 2002c; Crafts 1985; 1870 Census, boys only
Explaining the increase in child labour

What explains the importance of child labour during the industrial revolution, an importance that seems to be associated with “starting early” and is particularly marked in the case of Britain the first industrial economy? Explanation is sought first in the development of the capitalist labour market.

Development of the capitalist labour market

The older literature, given its fixation on the employment of children in mills and mines, emphasized technology. Steam power and machinery were held to have allowed women and children to take over work that previously required the strength and skill of an adult male (Nardinelli, 1990). The data cited above provides ample evidence that industrial technologies differed in child labour opportunities (Horrell and Humphries, 1995; Goldin and Parsons, 1989). But the child intensity of textile technology cannot be taken as exogenous: “the relationship between technology and child labour was reciprocal rather than one-sided. It cannot be ruled out that the machinery in early factories was specifically constructed to be used by children” (Bolin Hort, 1989; Lown, 1990). British patents reveal that spinning machinery of the eighteenth century was designed to be operated by children in a bid to reduce labour costs (MacLeod, 1988).

There are cases where available technology did seem to require the use of child labour. Tuttle (1999) makes much of the constraints involved with wooden machinery that had to be close to the ground. Similarly the narrowness of underground passages in thin seam pits in both British and Belgian coal mining prevented progress with the mechanization of transport that would have reduced if not ended the demand for child drawers (Humphries, 1981). In these cases technology does suggest a preference for child labour, which might therefore have been crucial to the success of these industries at certain stages in their development.
But these examples aside the case for technological determinism is weak. Comparisons show that the relative share of child labour in the work force was not technologically determined. The importance of children varied significantly across regions even when the same technology was in place (Bolin-Hort, 1989). Compare the low level of child employment in the Waltham system of textile production in New England in the mid-nineteenth century where young women rather than children were the preferred labour force, with the high proportions of children at work in Lancashire. In a sample of 43 Manchester mills, 22.3 per cent of the workforce was under 14 and 32.4 per cent under 16 while in 29 mills in Glasgow the proportions were 35.6 per cent and 48.3 per cent (Bolin-Hort, 1989, pp. 36-58). Similarly in Alsace in the 1820s, upwards of a third of the workforce in mills were under 16 (Heywood, 1998).

Even at the level of the firm, the same technology could be used with very different labour forces. Thus in the Ghent cotton industry, Peter Scholliers (1995) has shown that the large firm of Voortmans had a deliberate policy of recruiting child and female labour, a policy that the management pursued with increasing vigor over time. Whereas 3.7 per cent of the Voortmans labour force was under 15 in 1842, by 1859 it had risen to 10 per cent (Scholliers, 1995). But Voortmans was not typical of the textile industry in Belgium or even in Ghent. It was an outlier in the extent to which children’s labour was used (Scholliers, 1996). But exceptional as the Voortmans’ relative use of child labour was in Ghent, as the district data above suggests, it was modest in comparison with elsewhere.

Technology was one factor in a list of equally important determinants of the proportion of child workers including the availability of children, industrial organization, the employment strategy of manufacturers, and the strength of labour organizations representing men. It is necessary to broaden the discussion of developments in the capitalist workplace beyond an unsophisticated view of technological change.

The organization of the labour process has both direct implications for the demand for child labour and indirect implications through its influence over technology, employment strategies and labour relations. Goldin and Sokoloff (1982) argue that in the north-
eastern United States innovations such as a more elaborate division of labour, a more disciplined working environment and a larger scale of operation may have been just as important as technological change in creating the surge in the demand for female and child labour associated with industrialization. Similarly the role of these organizational changes in promoting the employment of women and children has been emphasized in the British context (Berg and Hudson, 1992). Here the role of organizational change in breaking down customary age and gender divisions in the workplace and undermining the power of labour organizations to defend such customary barriers has been emphasized. The undeserved neglect of organizational initiatives is consistent with the over-emphasis of researchers on factory production of textiles for these innovations were particularly important in miscellaneous manufacturing such as boot, shoe, glass and paper manufacturing, areas where it was argued above children’s work has been underestimated.

A focus on industrial organization highlights that children’s work far from always following the substitution of machinery for muscle power and the lightening of physical labour, was often the consequence of a failure to mechanize or to mechanize only a part of a process. Thus the expansion of child labour in coal mining was the result of increasing output in the absence of changed transport technology. Similarly in a wide swathe of industries, outside the celebrated example of textile production, partial mechanization created new jobs for boys and girls. Lathes and presses along with many simple machines needed boys to feed them. Again attention is deflected away from mills and mines to the diffused and workshop-based industries.

The part played by manufacturers’ strategies in boosting child labour also deserves more attention. The older literature documents the conscious turning of British manufacturers to child labour in the context of the labour shortages of the Napoleonic wars (Hammond and Hammond, 1917). The bellicose background of industrialization for several of the European early starters, may have contributed to their intensive use of child labour. In Britain one in ten able-bodied men was in military service in 1794 and one in six by 1809, while France, Russia, and Austria probably had about one in fourteen prime-aged
men under arms in the early nineteenth-century (Emsley, 1979; Cookson, 1997). Military participation on this scale was totally new and the effect on labour markets, pulling in child and female labour must have been substantial. Although there was some positive effect on nominal male wages, much of this was taken up by higher food prices. Moreover although men were not conscripted in Britain, recruitment methods including the press gang meant that they were not lured away by the offer of higher wages. Nor were their wives and children offered support. They were forced to seek poor relief from local authorities, which in the context of massively rising expenditures were increasingly pressed to make assistance conditional on seeking work (Carter, 1995). The post-1815 rapid demobilisation occurred within a society that had become inured to child employment and adopted social norms that did not censure parents for sending children out to work. Female heads of households, who were widowed, deserted and temporarily alone probably increased as a proportion of all households in these decades. Absent fiscal transfers these households were likely to experience chronic poverty and have little recourse except to employ their children (Humphries, 1997).

Manufacturers fended off government regulation of child labour with reference to the necessity of keeping labour costs low in the context of international competition. Selling overseas meant that cotton manufacturers had no shelter, which they might share with their workforces in the form of higher wages or a more socially acceptable workforce composition. They were driven to employ children in a way in which employers in other sectors could avoid. Such an interpretation was promoted by the cotton interests in their opposition to protective labour legislation (Engerman, 2003). But evaluation of the manufacturers’ claim that children’s work was a necessary evil, essential to the competitive success of the key industries of the industrial revolution, awaits counterfactual analysis of competitiveness without child labour. The insistence in this survey that child labour was widespread outside cotton and wool textiles does not entirely eliminate the link between children’s work and exporting. Recent work by Peter Temin (1997) has argued that not only textile producers but also manufacturers of a wide range of miscellaneous commodities exported. Temin thus spreads the imperatives of
international competitiveness into precisely those areas of the industrializing economy where this paper has suggested child labour existed unlaunched and unappreciated.

Employers’ strategies to reduce costs during the heyday of the industrial revolution certainly deserve more attention. In a situation where employers had some market power, where working families were not perfectly mobile between locations, then the employment of children will have a depressing effect on all wages, including the wages of adults. At the level of the household economy this will be re-enforcing, making children’s work increasingly necessary for family subsistence. The management of Voortmans pursued consciously and in a sophisticated fashion just such an employment strategy and made it effective even in densely populated cities and regions and without recourse to paternalism (Scholliers, 1996).

Labour relations also deserve further attention. An older generation of historians emphasized the part that the emasculation of labour organization played in the boom in child labour. The Hammonds (1917) chapters on child labour follow the chapter on “The war on Trade Unions”, which ends with the assertion: “the Combination Laws and the employment of children on a great scale are two aspects of the same system” (p.142). Recent work has been more likely to locate the erosion of customary barriers in the workplace and men’s inability to enforce traditional divisions to changes in industrial organization and to explore these issues in the context of the substitution of women for men. In view of the greater importance of child workers than married women this literature might be usefully refocused on the inability to resist dilution by age not gender (see also Cunningham, 2000).

**Family strategies**

Economic historians have located the supply of child labour in the workings of the household economy and discussed the decision whether or not to send a child to work in the context of a “family strategy”. A family strategy involves the family acting as a single unit in the interests of all members collectively (Ruggles, 1987). But how these
interests are identified and possibly heterogeneous preferences combined remains unclear. The family strategy resembles the economists’ unitary or consensus model of household decision-making, a model that has been extensively critiqued and widely rejected by empirical evidence. If parents and children have different preferences then the consensus model or family strategy is restrictive. In the literature this collapses into the issue of parental altruism. If parents do not care enough about the future welfare of their children the stage is set for agency problems in human capital formation within the household. In particular parents who are not caring will prefer children to earn now while they are alive and can exercise control over the disposition of the earnings rather than in the future. Children will overwork in the present and there will be under-investment in their health, education and training for the future. These problems do not occur in the same way if parents are altruistic towards their children in the sense of caring about the child’s consumption in the future (Goldin and Parsons, 1989).

In the absence of parental altruism, intervention to influence the household allocation of child labour and lifetime consumption of parents and children is justified. Intervention can take the form of subsidising education and so relaxing the trade-off between the current consumption of parents and the current education and future consumption of children. Alternatively non-altruism by parents may also justify legislation to ban child labour or make schooling compulsory.

But not all child work signals selfishness on the part of parents. Even with altruistic parents children may still work. There are three possible scenarios. First if the payoff to child labour in terms of the return to the physical investment of their earnings exceeds the return to human capital, the optimal strategy will involve child labour. Second if parents are sufficiently poor that they cannot meet the necessary expenditures of the household and if there are no possibilities of borrowing against the future earnings of children to boost current consumption, dissavings in the form of child labour may be necessary for survival. Third even if the family is not so impoverished, with capital market imperfections, higher borrowing than lending rates shift the trade-off between the value
of schooling and of child labour in favour of the latter because the family receives the income flows earlier.

Which of these scenarios holds matters because the optimal policy intervention is different. In particular where the family is so poor that children have to work, legislation may be difficult to enforce and it may even reduce the wellbeing of the children (Bhalotra, 2001). On the other hand in the first scenario the case for intervention must rest on there being greater private than public returns to education and subsidies to education would be the preferred policy as it would be in the third case where it would offset the capital market imperfection.

The relationship between child labour and household poverty has been investigated in a range of developing countries. In reviewing this evidence Bhalotra and Tzannatos (2001) underline the small and often insignificant effect of household income on child labour, evidence that challenges the assumption of altruism. Econometric problems with these estimates mean that this result cannot be accepted with full confidence. But other income and wage effects on child labour and income effects on schooling (Behrman and Knowles, 1999) also appear inconsistent with parental altruism. Among anthropologists parental altruism is also a debated issue with some powerful negative evidence.

Economists usually infer the altruism/selfishness of family members from outcomes in consumer goods markets. Studies have primarily investigated altruism between spouses or between grown children and aged parents and have by and large rejected altruism in these settings. But the model is applicable to the relationship between children and parents. Indeed there are good reasons to expect altruistic benefactions to be more likely “downwards” towards younger family members (Bergstrom, 1997; Bhalotra, 2001). If parents are unhappy about children working, then controlling for prices, child labour should be associated with reduced parental consumption. The intuition of this inference is that parents will equate the marginal utility of consumption to the marginal utility of child leisure, which is higher if children work. In a study of adult consumption in the context of the decision whether or not to send children to work Bhalotra (2001) found the
results for adult clothing, footwear, tea and coffee consistent with altruism. But tobacco consumption was not consistent with altruism.

Economic historians usually lack the household data needed for econometric investigation of relationships between parents and children and certainly are without the information on consumption expenditures that is needed to replicate the kind of analysis described above. A few studies explore the relationship between child labour and household poverty but the construction put on the evidence depends on the related assumptions. Goldin and Parsons (1989) use household data to investigate whether poor parents were altruistic vis a vis their children in late nineteenth century America. They assume perfect capital markets allowing resources to be moved freely across time and generations and perfect labour markets allowing families to move freely from one industrial centre to another in response to labour and capital market conditions and parental preferences. Altruism (or costlessly enforceable intergenerational contracts) is combined with the capital and labour market assumptions in the rejected model. The negative correlation between adult and child earnings that Goldin and Parsons find can then be interpreted as indicating that parents were willing to accept large reductions in their own wages to secure employment in areas having abundant child labour opportunities.

Goldin and Parsons do consider a capital constraints model but the high savings out of child earnings are held inconsistent with parents using child labour to offset borrowing difficulties alone. Thus they conclude that parents did not have strong altruistic concerns for their children. “The presence of industries with a high demand for child labour reduced the future wealth position of the offspring. Child labor had the obvious, almost definitional, negative effect on schooling attainment. At the same time the family provided little in the way of offsetting physical asset transfers (in the form of gifts and bequests) to compensate children for their lost schooling and future earnings. The increased family income was apparently absorbed in higher current family consumption. Indeed much of the apparent gain to family income from child earnings was illusory; greater child earnings were almost wholly offset by lower earnings for the adult male,
although unusually large families may have garnered rents in industries with strong demands for child labor” (Goldin and Parsons, 1989).

Horrell and Humphries (1995) do not explicitly consider the issue of altruism though their findings are suggestive. Expenditure data was recoverable for a sub-set of families in the budget data set. These families were not saving. Some households were in deficit, which they financed by pawning or borrowing from friends and relatives. Several were in receipt of poor relief. Moreover spending on food and rent dominated the budgets (Horrell, 1997). These families were closer to subsistence than those in the Wright Study. Nor is the context one where the assumptions of perfect capital markets and household mobility are plausible. Thus the finding that fathers’ earnings were negatively correlated with the likelihood of participation suggests that poverty was driving child labour. However the high participation rates of children in the factory districts, where fathers’ earnings were not low relative to fathers in other broad occupational groups, suggests that in some times and places the aspiration for consumer goods played a role (Horrell and Humphries, 1995; Voth, 2000).

Historians have approached the issue of parental altruism through evidence of the nature of the parent child relationship. Parents have received a bad press in much of the historical literature. “The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and sexually abused”. Lloyd deMause (1976) was perhaps extreme in his much-quoted denunciation of child-rearing in the past, but he was not alone in the 1970s and 1980s when a host of other historians perceived children as badly treated and parental love as a fragile protection (Shorter, 1977; Stone, 1977; Badinter, 1981). These historians considered the eighteenth-century to have seen an important turning point in the way in which children were perceived and treated.

Recently historians have been less hasty to condemn parents of the past and more careful to distinguish between practices, which are thought cruel or harmful today but were
considered appropriate in the past, and those that can be universally regretted. Linda Pollock’s (1983) book used diaries and autobiographical material on parent child relations to argue strenuously against any cultural shift or indeed the systematic ill treatment of children in the past. Pollack specifically considered the issue of child labour and on the basis of working-class evidence given to various public inquiries, she denied that parents by and large sent children to work for selfish reasons. In her view poverty lay behind child labour.

In contrast, many contemporaries suggested that selfish and greedy parents sent their children out to work, often in preference to working themselves, and used the children’s earnings to buy adult goods like alcohol and tobacco (for a summary of such views see Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973; Pollock, 1983; Nardinelli, 1990). Of course many of the informants quoted were employers of child labour or agents and representatives of such employers or at least members of the same socio-economic group as the employers. Their opinions reflected their interest in distancing themselves or their patron from what was increasingly seen as a reprehensible or at best uncaring activity and blaming somebody else. What do the working-class autobiographies add to this debate?

The decision for them to start work is invariably presented as something outside the control of either the children or their parents. The authors lapse into an atypical passive voice. “Found necessary” is the phrase that Edward Rymer (born 1835) uses (quoted in Humphries, 2003c). Behind the passive voice in which entry into work was described, was a general desire to exonerate parents from blame. Very few children supported the charge of parental exploitation that many contemporaries made or saw themselves as sent out to work to support shiftless or lazy parents. The majority of parents were kind and caring. The autobiographers groped towards an explanation of their parents’ inability to protect them.

Custom and practice, what was conventional in the community and what had been their own fate, was sometimes seen as guiding parents. Alfred Marshall observed that “Most parents are willing enough to do for their children what their own parents did for them;
and perhaps even to go a little beyond it if they find themselves among neighbours who happen to have a higher standard” (1969, p. 180). To go further required not merely unselfishness and affection, but also resistance to the forces of habit and a vision of a differently ordered future. Thomas Okey (born 1852) was better off than most working-class children, and his grand parents could well have afford to send him to the boarding school for which he yearned, but it was not to be. “My appointed station in life was that of a basket-maker, and straightway I was set to work…” (quoted in Humphries, 2003c). Parents are often condemned for expecting nothing better for their children which historians have sometimes read as hardness (see Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973, p. 402) but in a world of scant education and narrow horizons it seems forgivable.

The role of limited imagination in decisions to send children to work was minor in comparison with the cold grey forces of poverty “the narrowness of our circumstances” as Joseph Mayett (born 1783) termed it (quoted in Humphries, 2003c). A major determinant of a family’s economic circumstances was the father’s earnings. Evidence from British autobiographies shows that age at starting work was clearly linked to fathers’ occupational group as a proxy for their earnings power. Men in trades, clerical and service occupations were an aristocracy of labour who could hope to earn more and certainly more on a regular basis that agricultural labourers and domestic manufacturers. Predictably the children of tradesmen, clerical and administrative workers and service occupations were withheld from the labour market for longer than those of agricultural labourers and domestic manufacturers (Humphries, 2003c).

While fathers’ earnings played a role in the families economic circumstances, and so influenced children’s age at starting work, they do not provide the whole story. Fathers who were factory workers for example were often relatively well paid and yet their children were some of the youngest workers in all phases of industrialization. The demand for child labour may well be part of the explanation here unfortunately also correlated with fathers’ occupations and in the case of factory workers pulling in a direction opposite to relative earnings.
Most parents were not only kind they were also hard working: “poor but industrious” is a reoccurring phrase. Industry simply could not compensate for the level of wages. Recent definitive estimates of real earnings over the industrial revolution show that solid improvements did not occur until after 1850 (Feinstein, 1998) and that many occupational groups suffered periodic setbacks, findings consistent with the apparent maintenance of high levels of child participation through to 1850.

Fathers’ diligence could not help if there was no work available. The process of industrialization itself involved the rise and fall of sectors, technological change, shifts in the location of work, and an intensification of the business cycle. Falling relative wages and pools of unemployment were signals in a changing labour market. But it took time to read these signals, to distinguish a temporary situation from something more permanent, and to decide upon an accommodation. A proper response was often expensive involving migration or retraining and so was blocked by imperfect capital markets and lack of information. In the meantime a holding strategy involved adding workers, putting more family members to work, finding jobs for children, responses described many times in the memoirs. Of course what may have been seen as a temporary expedient could become prolonged as what was thought a passing problem turned out to be a permanent nightmare. Child labour could then become a standard practice emulated by other desperate families and entrenched in community norms. Moreover if the generation of children sent to work early in response to shifts in the demand for labour, had less opportunity to accumulate human capital, it would grow up to be less productive and so less able when the time came to support its own children. In this way demand shocks in the labour market could have echo effects that held the economy at low levels of productivity and high rates of child labour.

Such “added-worker effects” characterized the prolonged competition between hand trades and factory production, promoting and intensifying child labour. Here the problem was not just a lack of work but the falling prices of the commodities produced by the domestic manufacturers using traditional methods and hand skills but produced in the factories using water and then steam powered machinery and child labour. Given living
memories of the earnings premia that their skills had secured, the changes crept up slowly on male domestic manufacturers. Prices had oscillated in the past so it was difficult to read their decline as the death knell for hand production. In the long-term faith rested in industrial recovery and the power of skill to restore competitiveness. In the short-term, domestic producers increased output to maintain incomes in the face of falling prices. Fathers’ worked longer and harder but this was complemented by and not a substitute for their wives and children’s work (Humphries, 2003c).

Not only fathers, but also mothers were depicted as doing their best to keep their families afloat. Again autobiographical testimony speaks to the enormous, indeed even unhealthy, self-sacrifice characteristic of working-class mothers. Only a minority of British mothers contributed to family income by participating in the labour market, while in the French and German working class autobiographies studied by Mary Jo Maynes (1995) mothers are commonly remembered working for wages. The extent to which mothers participated in the economy appears to have influenced the extent of child labour in the past and may have implications for other contexts (Cunningham, 2000). In the British context mothers’ participation appears not to influence age at which children started work. A regression of age at starting work on mothers’ participation controlling for fathers’ occupational group, cohort and a number of family characteristics found that the coefficient on mothers’ participation was not statistically different from zero (Humphries, 2003c).

Mothers are never depicted consuming the fruits of their children’s labour. Patrick Barclay’s (born 1952) mother was typical. “…untiring energy, unfailing health and hope and faith, and never a new dress, never a holiday, never any leisure or amusement, never I fear even a generous meal of victuals. All work and no play, but still not dull” (quoted in Humphries, 2003c). Fathers’ may have been less generously disposed to sacrifice their consumption in the interests of their children, suggesting a systematic gradation in parental altruism that has interesting implications. If mothers were more altruistic than fathers were then the common tendency observed in the autobiographies for children to give their earnings to their mothers suggests that the earnings were recycled in children’s
interests. How mothers weighed the claims of older and younger children, and of working and dependent children is another question.

In a few cases, boys did blame parents, and in particular fathers, for it was invariably fathers who were indicted, for contributing to their families’ poverty and so to early working. Two activities were difficult to forgive. The first was drinking. Alcoholism was a huge cause of misery for working families. In the worst case a father’s drinking preceded abandonment, which in turn often broke up the home and resulted in the child’s destitution or reliance on poor relief. Lucy Luck, whose brother appears in her stead in the data set (born 1845), sums up her father in a few words. “…he was an experienced brick-layer by trade, but was a drunkard and a brute. After bringing his wife and children to poverty and starvation he deserted them and left my mother to face the world alone as best she could with her family, and she never heard of him again” (quoted in Humphries, 2003c). Lucy draws a direct line of causation from her father’s alcoholism and betrayal to her sojourn in the workhouse and her brother’s and her entry into the silk mills before they were nine years old.

But sons did not always see their fathers’ drinking as selfish despite its often-bitter consequences. Drinking was as a retreat into which men were harassed and herded by their inability to provide, the physical demands of their hard jobs, and the grimness of their working lives. It was also a response to loss, either of children or of a wife (Humphries, 2003c). Moreover alcohol has addictive and stimulant characteristics, which might explain its overpowering of the altruistic leanings of fathers. The evidence on drink is interesting for the damage it causes to an otherwise convincing account of altruistic and caring parenthood and for the fact that the damage relates almost exclusively to father-son relationships. The identification of the most dramatic evidence for selfishness with male consumption concurs not only with other descriptive and normative evidence on the greater and more universal altruism of mothers but also with modern evidence associating non-altruism with stimulant and addictive goods consumed mainly by men.
The second parental behaviour that boys found difficult to forgive and which even at this simple descriptive level is difficult to square with parental altruism was desertion. Families without a male head were almost invariably destined for poverty and the children in them for signal deprivation including early working (Humphries, 1997). While there are one or two instances of maternal abandonment, most desertions were by fathers, perhaps more evidence for a gender difference in altruism.

The final determinant of family poverty and so of child labour clearly identified in the autobiographies was family size. Large families were clearly implicated in the need for children to supplement fathers’ earnings by going out to work. In the British case industrialization proceeded against a backdrop of historically rapid population growth and increased average family size. Children aged nine and under in 1821 made up 28 per cent of the population and young people between 10 and 19 another 21 per cent. This proportion had probably increased through the eighteenth century. The pressures created by the rising dependency rate have been somewhat neglected by economic historians but its potential as an explanation of the pattern and extent of child labour in the British case is considerable. Britain’s unusual demographic experience may well also cast light on the exceptional reliance on child labour.

One additional finding from the British autobiographical data is that being without a father (perhaps even a non-altruistic father) had a large and significant effect on age at starting work, on average pushing children into the labour market more than fifteen months before they would otherwise have begun work (Humphries, 2003c). Nor was this effect recorded in the absence of any help to lone mothers or to orphans. The Old Poor Law arguably treated lone mothers relatively more generously than does the modern welfare state (Snell and Millar, 1984). However the retreat of the Old Poor Law in the face of the rising expenditures of the late eighteenth century and the transition to the New Poor Law, while not eliminating fiscal transfers, emphasized the conditionality of assistance on childhood working. While this issue cannot be followed up in the autobiographical evidence, other material has suggested the negative implications for human capital formation of this welfare regime switch (Horrell, Humphries and Voth,
2001). In a world where orphaned and fatherless children are legion, perhaps this is the most pertinent finding from the past.

**The role of the state**

The state’s role is usually reserved for introduction in the context of the disappearance of child labour. But this survey has provided examples of the ways in which state action or inaction suggested its compliance with if not complicity in the boom in child labour. This is not to suggest a conscious strategy on the part of government agents though several apocryphal stories repeated in the classic British accounts suggest as much (Mantoux, 1927; Hammond and Hammond, 1917, p. 143). More likely the boom in child labour was the unintended consequence of a number of policies pursued by the state in the tense and difficult years of industrialization. The legislation weakening labour organization (the Combination Acts, the repeal of the Statute of Artificers) set the scene for dilution. The curmudgeonly treatment of the wives and children of soldiers during the French wars played a part (Trustram, 1984). At local level the increasingly mean and conditional response of the Poor Law authorities from the late eighteenth century, culminating in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act also increased children’s exposure.

**Cultural context**
The idea of a change in parent-child relations in the eighteenth century, as noted above, is firmly established in the literature, with the harshness of parental treatment of children in the medieval and early modern periods giving way to kinder and more caring treatment. Such a shift in values has intriguing implications for the historian of child labour. It suggests that those countries which industrialized early and so before this transition was completed might be expected to have used child labour more intensively than those countries which industrialized later in the context of a different conception of childhood and parenting. The apparent importance of child labour to the early starters is given cultural underpinnings. The “contingent accidents” of history could influence social norms. Thus wartime labour shortages perhaps inured people to child labour. In such times it may have been excusable and subsequently became mundane.

Explaining the end of child labour

Economists have most often looked at historical evidence to try to understand why child labour disappeared in today’s advanced countries in the search for policies to encourage its decline in the Third World.

Development of the capitalist labour market

A favourite story is that child labour declined because the demand for it faded as more advanced industrial technologies found little value in the unskilled labour of children (Goldin and Parsons, 1989; Nardinelli, 1990). Cunningham points out the weakness of this argument. “It is assumed that technology has its own in built rationale and that it always acts in favour of adult and in opposition to child labour” (2000, p. 417). Technological change is not exogenous but conditioned by employers’ strategies and even labour relations as suggested above. Earlier technology had developed to facilitate the substitution of child for adult labour. Why should it suddenly change direction unless driven to do so by a shift in the interests of management or labour? Technology can really only enable the reduction in child labour. There has to be a motive for its development and introduction.
Employers sometimes took the initiative in campaigning for a reduction in child labour. This was true in France in the 1840s and in some industries in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century (Weissbach, 1989; Dupree, 1995, Humphries, 1981). Their motives appear to have been an amalgam of philanthropic and strategic concerns. Some employers or groups of employers who had already dispensed with child labour or who had available technology for its elimination sought to steal a competitive advantage over other employers for whom child labour was essential by promoting protective labour legislation (Marvell, 1977; Humphries, 1981). Others were convinced that child labour was morally wrong (see the Hammonds on Peel, 1917, ch.VIII) or that it was in the collective interest to develop a healthier and more educated workforce. According to Cunningham (2000, p. 418) the mid-nineteenth century saw a shift in managerial strategies which emphasized an intensive rather than an extensive labour process in which the strength and power of adults was needed.

But an account of changes in the capitalist labour market, which deals only with employers’ strategies is unbalanced. By the mid-nineteenth century male labour had begun to reorganize defensively within revamped institutions. The extensive literature on the rise of the male breadwinner family suggests how strong trade unions, protective labour legislation and campaigns for “family wages” led to the rise of the male breadwinner family. Traditionally presented from a feminist perspective and focussed on the exclusion of female labour, the argument is weakened by differences in the timing of women’s retreat from the labour market and the era when men’s organizations became effective (Creighton, 1996). Re-oriented to provide a political economic explanation of the decline of child labour the pieces of the argument slot neatly into place and fit with the chronology of “adulting” as laid out.

Technological determinism, which relies on apparently exogenous changes in textile machinery, cannot explain either the timing or generality of the decline of child labour. A more sophisticated account, which weaves technological change into the strategic interaction between employers and workers, has more mileage.
Family strategies

In the context of the decline of child labour the family strategies approach is associated with Nardinelli’s (1990) neoclassical analysis of the British evidence. More New Household Economics than family strategies as usually presented, Nardinelli argued that since working families in the early nineteenth century had the option of not sending their children out to work but chose to do so it must have been the best choice available. Ignoring the possibility of heterogeneous preferences and agency problems by assuming a unitary household, Nardinelli disputed the effectiveness of government intervention. The decline in children’s work, which Nardinelli moved forward in time compared with the chronology described above, predated any effective labour legislation. In fact Nardinelli held that protective labour legislation was only possible because the majority of powerful employers had already dispensed with child labour. Nardinelli was at pains to emphasize too the stability of preferences. There is no cultural shift in parent child relations here, no inauguration of new attitudes to children and romanticisation of childhood. The decline of child labour then became the outcome of a shift in family decisions explainable solely in terms of incomes and relative prices. The latter link back to Nardinelli’s faith that technology was rendering child labour unproductive compared with its cost. Thus the boom in child labour hinged on a fortuitous coincidence of a transient technology and low male wages. It declined when technology moved inexorably forward and male wages rose, allowing children to be sent to school instead of work. The policy implications are profound. Low adult wages are the cause of child labour and nothing can be done about it, except to wait for economic growth, which with Chicago School optimism Nardinelli implies is imminent provided well-meaning but inappropriate government intervention does not stymie it.

Nardinelli’s analysis of the causes of the decline of child labour was consistent with his version of the facts in terms a rapid decline in child labour starting before the Factory Acts and strong growth in the real earnings of adult males from 1820. The former is
called into question by evidence suggesting that children’s involvement in productive activities was more extensive and more enduring than Nardinelli thought, which resurrects the possibility at least that protective labour legislation contributed to decline. The latter is outdated. Nadinelli used estimates of real earnings growth by Lindert and Williamson (1984) that have now been completely overhauled. Feinstein’s (1998) definitive series delays sustained growth in real earnings until mid-century. The new view is out of sync with Nardinelli’s dating of decline but fits neatly with the later and more gradual decline posited above as well as with an explanation that draws on the socio-economic construction of the male breadwinner family system in the second half of the nineteenth century. The latter point is important for the growth in adult earnings in the later nineteenth century was not independent of the struggle ongoing not only in capitalist labour markets but also within parliament and the press between the opponents and proponents of child labour. This struggle in turn was but one aspect of a campaign to defend the integrity of the working class family.

One household structure variable that emerged as an important determinant of age at starting work, and yet is often forgotten in stories about the decline of child labour, is family size. Fertility peaked in Britain in the 1820s. But class and occupational differentials remained through the nineteenth century and offer the possibility of testing a relationship that looks promising.

**The role of the state**

An older generation of historians explained the decline of child labour almost solely in terms of the Factory Acts (Hutchins and Harrison, 1903). But times change and neoclassical economics is predisposed to think intervention unnecessary if not mischievous. Nardinelli’s case for thinking the Factory Acts nugatory is unconvincing but other studies of other times and places must be taken more seriously.

Moehling (1999) uses a “difference-in-differences-in-differences” procedure to isolate the effects of child labour laws on children’s participation by state in the US between
1880 and 1930. Between these dates child labour fell precipitously. But the dramatic decline was not driven by the legislative success of the child labour movement. The occupation rate of 13-year olds did decline in states that enacted age minima of 14, but so did the occupation rates of children not covered by the restrictions (Moehling, 1999). Thus Moehling joins other authors in seeing child labour laws as consequences rather than causes of the decline in children’s work.

On the other hand, other legislation is widely agreed on the basis of child employment rates to have had some effect. The classic case is the 1833 Factory Act whose impact is acknowledged even by Nardinelli. Cunningham (2000) provides a list of child labour laws that historians have claimed were effective including: the 1864 act which reduced children’s participation in the potteries (Dupree, 1995); the 1872 Mines Regulation Act (Church, 1986); the 1874 act in France (Weissbach, 1989); and the measures taken by the National Recovery Administration in the US in 1933 (Trattner, 1970).

More recently Ha-Joon Chang (2002) has scrutinized the historical record on regulating child labour not to demonstrate regulation’s inability to oppose the logic of the market but to establish the time it took to become effective. Chang argues that the child labour standards demanded of the Third World today imply a swift eradication of children’s work, while the now rich countries took many years to wipe out children’s work. Thus the standards required of poor countries today are very different from those adopted by the now rich countries at the same stage of development. Chang then takes the now developed countries’ stance on child labour to be an example of his more general argument that the now-developed countries industrialized and became rich using policies and institutions which were often the opposite of those they now thrust on poor countries. In this way the developed countries are attempting to “kick away the ladder” by which they rose to prosperity and deny poor countries the same route to the top.

While Chang has a point, the application of his general argument to child labour, even without debating his dating of events, has flaws. First the time-scale by which regulation moved from first through serious to comprehensive in most cases is less drawn out than
Chang suggests, certainly less than the “centuries” mentioned in the text. Second the now advanced economies industrialized at different times and made different demands on child workers with implications for legislative progression. We might expect the slow development of regulation in countries where child labour was mainly confined to family farms for example. Third, as noted above, the early starters made more extensive use of child labour suggesting that even within the sample of now rich countries a later entry into the race for prosperity involved different standards of acceptable conduct. Yet this did not kick away the ladder to development in Sweden for example. Fourth, while some of the policies and institutions that now rich countries frown upon in Third World contexts can logically be linked to economic development (tariffs for example through the infant industries argument) the contribution of child workers to economic growth (as opposed to current profits) has not been established. Indeed given the likely inverse relationship between child labour and human capital formation, disallowing children’s work might just provide a ladder rather than kick one away!

An alternative way of curbing child labour through state intervention was by requiring school attendance. Unlike child labour laws compulsory schooling does not encourage a move into unregulated and perhaps less desirable work. Case studies suggest that the desire to limit child labour was a motive for compulsory schooling (Hogan, 1985). For a number of European and non-European countries the decline in child labour appears correlated in time with the introduction of compulsory education (see Weiner, 1991). Remember that in Britain the fall in the participation rate of 10-14 year olds gathered momentum after the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1870. But the importance of compulsory education has not yet been demonstrated in a study that controls for changes in other possible explanatory variables. Given the important policy implications that ride on the validity of this link more research is needed.

Schooling subsidies, in principle an attractive option have not been studied historically. Yet several observations are suggestive. The first concerns the extent to which the opportunities afforded by Sunday schools were seized. Such schools were free if not subsidized and since they met on the Sabbath did not interfere with work. The popularity
of charity schools is also interesting. But simultaneously working class parents’ apparent preference for non-state schools that were under their jurisdiction in comparison with free state schools pursuing a national curricular delivered in a formal setting (Gardner, 1984) suggests that parents valued the right to interrupt children’s schooling more than the cost of choosing the private option.

Historians have shown orphaned and fatherless children to be the most vulnerable to early and exploitative work suggesting that another useful intervention to curb child labour involves fiscal transfers to such families. Comparisons of rudimentary welfare systems suggest that welfare-improving intervention was possible at low incomes (Snell and Millar, 1987; Horrell, Humphries and Voth, 2001).

Cultural context

A cultural account of child labour could be built around the diffusion to the working class of the transition in parent child relations that historians have documented for the elite. More attractively the political economic campaigns of the later nineteenth century around protective labour legislation, the integrity of the family, and the family wage could themselves have influenced values and attitudes. The theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that the routine expression of ideas and beliefs is intolerable unless they are adopted. Victorian working men embraced the schooled child along with a non-working wife as hallmarks of a desirable and respectable family life that went with, indeed required, higher adult male pay. Their wage demands became inseparable from a package of ideas about proper family structure that went to the heart of contemporary views of enlightened and civilized society. Thus their claim was eventually supported by large groups of men in other ranks in society prepared perhaps to sacrifice some immediate self-interest to accommodate the diffusion of a family structure that had powerful appeal.

Conclusions
Child labour occurs today in countries that bear a greater resemblance to the now advanced countries on the eve of industrialization than to those same countries 50-100 years later when child labour began to fall. Not only is poverty endemic but also wars and disease have left millions of children orphaned. Worldwide the proportion of households headed by women is rising. State and private institutions charged to protect such children have not been able to cope. When children are dying in large numbers of hunger and disease and being murdered in wars and ethnic conflicts, child labour is certainly not the worst that can happen. But the historian recommends neither resignation nor complacency. The documentation of the interplay of interests that over time led to the “adulting” of the labour force has resonance with Basu’s theoretical conjecture (1999) that labour markets with child labour have multiple equilibria. Historical analyses inform understanding of the processes by which equilibrium are achieved or discarded.
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