

PART II  
ECONOMIC FACTORS AND POLITICS

V  
TRADE CYCLES, HARVESTS, AND POLITICS  
1790-1850

*You cannot get them to talk of politics so long as they are well employed.—*  
WILLIAM MATHEWS, 1833.

*I have observed during the whole time I have been in Lanarkshire that any rise in the rate of discount at the Bank of England has been immediately, or at least shortly, followed by an increase both of crime and of civil suits, and if it continues long, of mortality and typhus fever. So much so, that, as I am an official member of the prison board and of most of the Charities, I have always made it a rule to say . . . 'Gentlemen, the Bank of England have raised their discounts, you had better immediately take measures for enlarging the prison accommodations and for extending the infirmaries and Poor houses.'*  
—A. ALISON, Sheriff of Lanarkshire, 1848.

I

HISTORIANS of every shade of bias admit the importance of the influence of economic situations on political and social events. The weight attached to economic factors or, more precisely, the mechanism of their action is, however, by no means settled. The most familiar relation that has hitherto been emphasized in the years 1790-1850 links the mechanical inventions of the late eighteenth century to the growth of the factory system and to the consequent rise of a large urban proletariat and a powerful middle class. From these relations, which are essentially sociological, efforts have been made to explain the political forces that produced the Reform Bill of 1832, the Chartist Movement, the repeal of the Corn Laws. In the realm of cultural history, the rise to dominance of a philosophy of individualism and a cult of romanticism have been linked to the same forces, with ramifications in economic doctrine, religion, architecture, and poetry. Such attempts at interconnexion represent a long-run analysis of economic influences. For many purposes,

especially where economic influences operate at several removes, that sort of generalization is adequate.

Experience of the inter-war years, however, impressed observers with the tremendous impact of economic forces, acting over shorter periods. Changes in social structure, in political atmosphere and policy, and in intellectual attitudes can be more or less directly traced to the depression after 1929. While it is true that these trends (and the causes of depression as well) have a long history reaching back, at least, to 1873, their timing, their intensity, and their unique character are closely connected with recent short-run developments. Many historians have taken account of this type of influence, but rarely have they done so systematically.<sup>1</sup>

From 1790 to 1850 there were at least three major economic forces that contributed, at intervals, to British social and political unrest: cyclical unemployment, fluctuations in domestic harvests, and technological unemployment. The latter, by itself, was not likely to produce major disturbances; nor can it be sharply distinguished from cyclical unemployment. The underemployment of hand-loom weavers was, admittedly, an important element in the Luddite and Chartist movements; and the resentment of the hand-loom weavers against the introduction of machinery often gave a peculiar character to the activity of wider groups. The most serious unrest, however, was a product of cyclical depression and high food prices.

## II

Good harvests with resulting low grain prices were calculated to call forth complaint from the landholders and from tenants burdened with fixed rent payments. The demand for grain was sufficiently inelastic to bring a decline in gross income when good harvests caused a sharp fall in price; and,

<sup>1</sup> Of the studies covering the first half of the nineteenth century G. D. H. Cole's *Short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1789-1927*, makes perhaps the most consistent use of a framework of business fluctuations and price movements. See, for example, vol. i, pp. 79, 88, 105, 177-88. But in describing strikes, and even phases of political development, many opportunities for relating the data to short-period fluctuations are missed.

until 1832 at least, the agrarian interest was disproportionately represented in Parliament. The simplest short-period, economic-political relation is that between the wheat price and the Corn Laws.

The Corn Laws were altered principally in the following years: 1791, 1804, 1815, 1822, 1828, 1842. Repeal came, of course, in 1846. A glance at the annual average wheat price reveals the principal setting for these amendments.

The wheat price fell from 56s. per quarter in May 1790 to 42s. in October 1791. The movement continued to a low point of 47.0s. in May 1792. The harvest of 1791 was 'one of great abundance' and, under the prevailing corn law, the fall in price was sufficient to cause the ports to be closed to foreign grain:<sup>1</sup> 'but the low price was productive, as usual, of complaint on the part of the landed interest, and was the occasion of a fresh corn bill'. The inadequate harvests of the following years, however, kept the wheat price at or above 50s., and the Act of 1791 was not called into operation.

The catastrophic fall in the wheat price, from 154s. per quarter in March 1801 to 50s. in February 1804, produced similar, though even more violent complaint. The Corn Laws were again modified. The area under cultivation had, of course, been greatly expanded between 1793 and 1804. A succession of abundant harvests brought forth an unparalleled supply of wheat.<sup>2</sup> The import limit was raised to 63s.<sup>3</sup> The cutting off of Baltic supplies resulting from the resumption of war, together with bad harvests, kept the wheat price above the new minimum until 1815. Like the Act of 1791, that of 1804 was never operative.

From August 1812, when the wheat price was 152s., to

<sup>1</sup> T. Tooke, *A History of Prices* (1838), vol. 1, p. 81. This act provided for a duty of 24s. 3d. if the price was under 50s.; 2s. 6d. at or above 50s. and under 54s.; 6d. at or above 54s., and a bounty of 5s. on exports at a price under 44s. See also W. Smart, *Economic Annals of the Nineteenth Century* (1917), vol. 1, pp. 90-2; and D. Macpherson, *Annals of Commerce* (1805), vol. iv, pp. 219-20.

<sup>2</sup> T. Tooke, *A History of Prices* (1838), vol. 1, pp. 237-9.

<sup>3</sup> Under the Corn Law of 1804 a duty of 24s. 3d. per quarter was imposed when the wheat price was under 63s.; and 2s. 6d. per quarter, when at or above that rate and under 66s.; and 6d. when above 66s. The lowest price reached between 1804 and 1815 was 66s., in November 1807.

January 1816 a steady decline took place. The break-up of the continental system and finally, the return to peace, as well as good harvests, caused this fall.<sup>1</sup> Despite considerable opposition<sup>2</sup> it was judged that only an 80s. import limit could protect the capital newly invested in agriculture.

Until the close of 1818 the wheat price remained above 80s., aided largely by inadequate harvests on the Continent and considerable exports from Britain to France.<sup>3</sup> But good harvests then brought on a decline to 39s. at the close of 1822. The period of severe agricultural distress has coloured the whole view of British agriculture in the three decades after the Napoleonic wars.<sup>4</sup> In 1822, however, the Government was trapped between the farmers' petitions and the opposition to further protection from labour, commercial, and industrial interests. At Peterloo, three years before, 'No Corn Laws' had appeared on the banners. Unlike the position in 1815 the decline in agricultural prices (1818-22) was accompanied by a decline in import prices and non-agricultural domestic prices. The Corn Law of 1822 modified only slightly the terms of the Act of 1815.<sup>5</sup> 'The farmers had asked for bread and gotten a stone'; but there were others, too, asking for bread between 1818 and 1822.

From the second quarter of 1823 to the last quarter of 1828 the price of wheat hovered between 50s. and 70s. per quarter. Although the farmers were far from content, their relative position was, with respect to profits, probably no worse than that of the manufacturer or exporter; after the crisis of 1825, in fact, it was probably better. And those who sought a reduction in agricultural protection were victorious in the

<sup>1</sup> Tooke, *op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 322-5; vol. ii, pp. 2-4; also *Annual Register*, 1814, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> T. Doubleday, *A Financial History of England* (1859), p. 227, notes that the protection of soldiers was required for members of the House of Commons, on the passage of the 1815 Corn Law, such was 'the fury of the people'.

<sup>3</sup> Tooke, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 16-18.

<sup>4</sup> For a modification of the traditional view of unrelieved depression, see G. E. Fussell and M. Compton, 'Agricultural Adjustments after the Napoleonic Wars', *Economic History*, Feb. 1939.

<sup>5</sup> See Smart, vol. ii, pp. 117-18, for a detailed account of this Bill which, like those of 1791 and 1804, was never really operative. A feature of its terms was the application of a sliding scale of duties when the price rose above 70s.

Corn Law of 1828.<sup>1</sup> It is probable that the growing prestige of free-trade ideas and the parliamentary influence of industrial and mercantile groups played some part in moderating the 1815 bill.<sup>2</sup> There was, however, an immediate economic basis reflected crudely in the movement of relative prices in the twenties:<sup>3</sup>

	<i>Domestic price index</i>	<i>Import price index</i>	<i>Wheat price (s. per quarter)</i>
1823 . . .	97	99	5 <sup>2</sup>
1827 . . .	106	82	56

It is clear that, from 1823 to 1827, the wheat price did not share the net fall experienced in most other markets. After 1825, a peak year in general prosperity, this disparity was especially felt; and it was in the post-crisis atmosphere that antagonism to the Corn Law of 1815 developed.<sup>4</sup>

Until the last quarter of 1832 the wheat price remained well above 50s. and, although the farmers never ceased to complain, their position was not desperate. The three following years (1833-6), however, brought abundant harvests, low prices, and extensive parliamentary investigations. Although the pressure for further protection increased, no action was taken by a Parliament in which anti-agrarian interests had been materially strengthened by the Reform Bill of 1832.<sup>5</sup>

At the close of 1836 the wheat price again rose suddenly as the harvest of that year appeared inadequate.<sup>6</sup> Chronically

<sup>1</sup> Smart, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 439. The sliding scale introduced in 1828, after two years of controversy, ranged from a duty of 34s. 8d. when the home price was 52s., to 1s. when the home price was 73s. In fact this amounted to only a very slight modification on the preceding Bill, although the trend against agricultural protection had clearly set in.

<sup>2</sup> Their long-term significance was symbolized, perhaps, in the person of William Huskisson.

<sup>3</sup> Non-agricultural domestic commodities show, on the whole, a greater net decline than the domestic index, which includes wheat and a variety of other agricultural commodities heavily weighted.

<sup>4</sup> See Tooke, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 136, on food prices (1826-7), relatively high 'in the distressed state of the manufacturing population'.

<sup>5</sup> The Poor Law of 1834, however, may be considered, in part, as a concession to the hard-pressed landowners. It was in the agricultural districts that the burden of poor rates, under the old system, was most severely felt.

<sup>6</sup> Tooke, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 157-8.

bad yields kept the price abnormally high until 1842. In this period the anti-Corn Law forces crystallized outside of Parliament, deriving additional strength from the generally depressed state of industry and the high level of unemployment, especially after 1839. This protracted pressure on real wages helped bring about the Whig tariff reforms of 1841: but 'Corn duties they left where they were, crying over their shoulders as they were being pushed out of office that a reasonable fixed duty . . . was the right thing'.<sup>1</sup> Peel was elected on the issue of the sliding scale, and in 1842 his modifications of the Corn Law of 1828 consisted in lowering the maximum duty and in making the sliding scale less steep.<sup>2</sup> He himself believed this arrangement to be a considerable reduction in protection, and it was put forward as such. There is no doubt that the high food prices and depression in the previous few years had, by 1842, helped to discredit the whole argument for agricultural protection and for tariffs generally.

The role of the Irish famine in the suspension and, ultimately, in the repeal of the Corn Laws is a familiar short-period sequence, as is also the tangled and dramatic political story of 1846. It is probable, in fact, that strictly economic considerations played a somewhat lesser part in the final repeal than in some of the earlier modifications. In 1845 and the first three quarters of 1846 the domestic wheat price ranged between 45s. and 59s. A few years before it had been over 70s. The Irish famine might have been dealt with by extraordinary measures short of actual repeal. The rise in the wheat price (to a peak of 93s. in June) in 1847, however, would almost certainly have ended agricultural protection then, if its end had not been accomplished earlier.

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain* (1926), vol. i, p. 497. The Whigs went out of office in 1841, to be succeeded by Peel and the Tories, until 1846.

<sup>2</sup> W. Page, *Commerce and Industry*, vol. i, pp. 128-30. The new scale started with wheat at 50s. paying 20s. duty, diminished to 1s., when the price was 73s. (as in the scale of 1828). There were two 'rests' in the scale, wheat from 52s. to 54s. paying a duty of 18s. a quarter, and wheat between 66s. and 68s. paying a duty of 8s. This, it was hoped, would check the speculations of corn dealers, who had been tempted, by the steepness of the scale of 1828, to hold back corn in the hope of getting higher prices.

This account is not meant, of course, to deny the long-period factors making for a reduction in agricultural protection: the growth of population, the accelerated industrialization of Britain, the widening political power of the urban middle classes and their free-trade doctrines. But it is clear that the timing of the events leading up to repeal were closely connected with the British harvests and other short-run factors influencing the absolute and relative level of the prices of agricultural products.

## III

1. *The Speenhamland System, 1795.* The years 1794 and 1795 saw some industrial recovery in Great Britain, from the depression of 1793. A more powerful force, however, affecting labour's position, was a rise in foodstuff prices, due primarily to bad harvests.<sup>1</sup> The wheat price was 43·2s. per quarter in January 1792, 108s. in August 1795. Cost-of-living indexes reveal this rise graphically.

	<i>Gilboy-Boody</i> (cost of living in London)	<i>Silberling</i> (wholesale prices of foodstuffs, &c.)
1793 . . .	148	106
1794 . . .	168	110
1795 . . .	179	130

Although money wages rose, there seems little doubt that they rose 'in a very inadequate proportion to the increased price of the necessaries of life'.<sup>2</sup> There was widespread evidence of physical distress,<sup>3</sup> and the wage-subsidy scheme for out-of-door relief was instituted, much in the tradition of the Elizabethan poor laws.

2. *The Combination Acts, 1799 and 1800.* From the last quarter of 1796 until about the middle of 1799 the price of wheat and the cost of living remained moderately low.

<sup>1</sup> Tooke, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 181-3 and 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6. It is perhaps worth noting that the situation in 1795-6 had direct and immediate influence on the ideas of Thomas Malthus, Frederick Eden, and Thomas Paine, as well as many others.

Despite the brief but severe depression of 1797, these were, internally, years of relative peace. The wheat price (which, at the end of 1798 was down to 48s.) then rose to a peak of 154s. in March 1801. The cost-of-living indexes move as follows:

	<i>Gilboy-Boody</i>	<i>Silberling</i>
1798 . . .	165	121
1799 . . .	229	143
1800 . . .	252	170
1801 . . .	190	174

The government acted by offering bounties on grain imports, by sending agents to the Baltic ports, and by encouraging the process of inclosure. In 1799-1801, in general, the working classes were fairly well employed. Even the crisis in the Hamburg trade, in 1799, did not induce a prolonged deflation.<sup>1</sup> Under these circumstances the workers had considerable market leverage in contracting money-wage bargains.<sup>2</sup> In the attempt to maintain their real wage, at a time of rapidly rising costs of living, the men resorted to various types of combinations. Even agricultural workers banded together in certain areas, notably in Norfolk.

Although the combination movement was very much the outgrowth of a particular short-period situation, and although the typical expression of discontent was the local bread riot or strike, the unrest was, at times, successfully linked with republican ideas. The corresponding societies, particularly, attempted to shape and unify the general dissatisfaction around the current liberal platform. With the memory of the French Revolution fresh in mind the Government acted to repress the corresponding societies and the combinations.

<sup>1</sup> Willard Thorp's *Business Annals*, p. 152, seriously misrepresents the position of British industry from 1798 to 1801. Each of those years is headed 'depression', although output was almost certainly increasing and unemployment was low. This is not meant, of course, to deny the reality of the difficulties due to high living costs, from 1799 to 1801.

<sup>2</sup> For the role of a prosperity demand for labour in the unrest of these years see Macpherson, *op. cit.*, vol. iv, pp. 475 and 500. Strikes for higher wages were, in this as in later periods, a familiar characteristic of the latter stages of business expansion.



The Acts of 1799 and 1800, reinforcing existing legislation,<sup>1</sup> made illegal all collective working-class activity except the guild functions of the friendly societies.

3. *The Repeal of the Combination Acts, 1824 and 1825.* From 1820 through the early months of 1825 a fairly continuous increase in output and employment occurred. In the latter stages of the boom prices rose, relieving manufacturers briefly from the chronic downward pressure that had existed since 1814. But the period 1820-4 saw a coincidence of increased output and a sagging price level. Foodstuff prices, too, were fairly low. It is not surprising, then, that in the four years after Peterloo British labour was relatively peaceful.

The fact of increasing prosperity, too, made it possible for the industrialists and the Government to afford a greater tolerance:<sup>2</sup> 'Exceptional measures of repression were allowed gradually to lapse; the activities of spies were relaxed; and the law was set less freely in motion against working-class attempts at combination'. It was in this atmosphere, early in 1824, that Place and Hume manoeuvred the repeal of the Combination Acts.

The repeal immediately brought into the open the trade unions which had been operating under cover in the previous two decades; and it encouraged the formation of many others. A wave of strikes broke out and, in the following year, an aroused Parliament seriously limited the easy-going terms of the Act of 1824.

There can be little doubt that the strikes of 1824-5 can, in some measure, be attributed to the repeal of the Combination Acts. Two other factors, however, were then operating. In the first place, in the latter half of 1824, the boom was suddenly accelerated, pushing the major British industries close to full employment. Enormous exports to South America and to the United States, as well as widespread internal enterprise, created a typical, late prosperity situation. Strikes for higher wages would, normally be expected.

<sup>1</sup> For the position of the 'Combination Acts of 1799-1800', as part of a long tradition of limitation, see D. George, 'The Combination Acts Reconsidered', *Economic History*, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Cole, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 88.

This tendency was accentuated by a second factor, a sudden rise in living costs:<sup>1</sup>

	Tucker (London artisans)	Silberling
1823 . . .	124	111
1824 . . .	126	113
1825 . . .	137	128

In 1825, with a confidence born of some five years of increasing employment, the unions instituted numerous strikes for higher wages—in the cotton, wool, coal, iron, building, and other trades.<sup>2</sup> At about the middle of 1825, however, the business cycle turned downward; and, although the strikes continued for some time, by the end of the year 'combination . . . was kicked on the head. Bradford weavers and combers went back to work at the old wages . . . so did the Renfrewshire colliers'.<sup>3</sup> In the bitter industrial conflicts that continued into 1826, labour was no longer on the offensive, but attempting to preserve wage rates in the face of a declining industrial demand.<sup>4</sup>

The repeal of the Combination Acts is properly regarded as an expression of the general trend toward *laissez-faire*, paralleled, in the twenties, by the Huskisson tariff reforms. Hume, in Parliament, presented the measure in such a light. Both Hume and Place regarded the unions as illiberal institutions brought into being by the repressive action of the Government; and they looked forward to their disappearance with the repeal of the Combination Acts.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the tolerant action of Parliament in 1824 was directly connected with the previous years of prosperity; the violence of the

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the inadequate harvest which largely explains this rise, see Tooke, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 132-5.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account, from contemporary sources of strikes in 1824-5, see Smart, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 232-3, and 306-13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 312-13.

<sup>4</sup> See *Annual Register*, 1826, Chronicle, pp. 67, 109-12, 115, 149-51.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Town Labourer*, pp. 134-6; Page, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 77, quotes Place as follows: 'Combinations will soon cease to exist. Men have been kept together for long periods only by the oppression of the laws; these being repealed, combinations will lose the matter which cements them into masses and they will fall to pieces.'

strikes of 1824-5 was largely the outgrowth of the situation in the labour market on either side of the cyclical turning-point, accentuated by rising costs of living. It is possible, too, that the intemperance of the reaction of the Government in withdrawing, in 1825, a large part of the freedom granted in the previous year, may be linked to the change in the industrial outlook which occurred in that year. With commodity prices falling, and disillusion setting in with respect to the newly floated Latin-American mining issues, the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, as applied to labour organization, seemed somewhat more empty than in 1824.

4. *The Factory Act of 1847.* Factory acts in the first half of the nineteenth century were passed in 1802, 1819, 1833, 1842, and 1847. Each arose in a unique political setting; but each saw a similar combination of humanitarian and anti-industrial groups arrayed against the manufacturers. Within the ranks of the manufacturers there were, of course, notable exceptions: men like Peel and Whitbread and Owen, to whom the conditions of factory labour were ethically outrageous and/or who believed that shorter hours and better conditions meant great efficiency and profits. In parliamentary debate, humanitarian arguments led to rebuttal based on pleas for the freedom of the individual, or originating in attacks on state paternalism. To these the manufacturer would often add the claim that shorter hours meant a serious reduction or even the destruction of the existing margin of profit, and the loss of foreign markets.

There is, however, probably some significance in the fact that these acts were all passed at, or close to, a low point in cyclical fluctuations. The years 1819 and 1842 are such troughs in general business conditions, while 1833 and 1847 were also generally depressed years (the troughs were in 1832 and 1848).<sup>1</sup> To a limited extent the children and women working in the factories and mines were competing with the men available for the jobs. At a time of severe cyclical unemployment it would be natural, then, that the men should complain, and attempt to oust their competitors

<sup>1</sup> The Factory Act of 1802, which dealt only with the pauper children, was probably inspired almost exclusively by religious and humanitarian motives.

or to limit their working time. A major driving force behind the movement which led to the Act of 1833, for example, was, 'the hope of absorbing men who are "hanging on the trade idle"',<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the Ten-hour Bill of 1847 the role of depression is even more clear. From 1845 onward unemployment was steadily increasing. In 1844 a Ten-hour Bill was defeated; in 1847 it was quietly passed:

*The Times*, in a leading article on the following day, said it was not to be imagined that there had been any considerable degree of conversion on the subject. The argument stood very much where it had done in 1844, and had, in fact, been almost exhausted in that memorable struggle. The absence of fierce opposition was attributed in a large measure to the fact that the chief argument of the opponents—namely, that the country could not spare the last two hours of industry—could not be brought forward in 1847 without inviting its own refutation, for so great was the depression of trade that the mill owners found it impossible to keep their mills working for so long as ten hours.<sup>2</sup>

From the side of the workers, too, a distinctly non-humanitarian factor can be detected in the ten-hour agitation. There seems to be little question that the labour unions viewed the measure as a means of restricting the labour supply and maintaining wage rates at a time of serious depression. At an early stage of the ten-hour agitation (December 1841) in a period of severe unemployment, Fielden was reported as having said:<sup>3</sup>

It is 'the duty of individuals to curtail the quantity of production when there is an over-abundant supply of the article they produce rather than increase it and reduce wages.' He considered that 'a reduction of hours of labour from twelve to ten would have this tendency,' and was therefore desirable, as they had already 'got mills and machinery to produce more than they could find a vent for at a remunerating price.'

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Clapham, *op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 572-4, from First Report of the Factory Commissioners (1833), vol. xx, p. 849. See also Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (1892), pp. 134-48, on the competition between the men and their wives and children.

<sup>2</sup> See B. L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation*, p. 70, with reference to *The Times*, 4 May 1847.

<sup>3</sup> Hutchins and Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-4 n.

To some extent, then, the Ten-hour Bill was passed because unemployment existed and because it was believed by some to be a recovery measure. In markets other than that for labour the restriction of supply, in an effort to maintain prices, was a typical depression phenomenon in these years.

The long-run economic and social influences reflected in the debates are perhaps more familiar.<sup>1</sup>

In Parliament, the factory question, from this time down to 1847, was really a part of the wider struggle between the agricultural landlords and the manufacturers over the repeal of the Corn Laws. 'The Tories were taunted with the condition of the labourers in the fields, and they retorted by tales of the condition of the operatives in factories. The manufacturers rejoined by asking, if they were so anxious to benefit the workman, why did they not, by repealing the Corn Laws, cheapen his bread. The landlords and the mill owners each reproached the other with exercising the virtues of humanity at other people's expense.'

This is not to deny, of course, that sincere humanitarians worked within the Ten-hour Movement; nor does it under-rate the importance of the strange political battle which led, finally, to the passage of the 1847 Bill. But it is clearly a case where the short-run position of the economic system—the degree of unemployment—played a part in determining the moment of its ultimate acceptance.

#### IV

Testifying before the Committee on Manufacturers (1832) William Mathews, Staffordshire iron manufacturer, was asked:

9991. Do you conceive that the depression of trade in late years has had any effect in producing . . . discontent?—Very great. 9992. Do you think the working classes of Staffordshire ever show political discontent so long as they are doing well in their particular trade?—Not at all; you cannot get them to talk of politics so long as they are well employed. 9993. Do you think any man could create discontent among them so long as they were doing well?—It is utterly impossible.

<sup>1</sup> Hutchins and Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–2, quoting Morley's *Life of Cobden*, vol. ii, p. 300.

The converse of the dictum—'you cannot get them to talk of politics so long as they are well employed'—is not to be generalized without reservation; but within this period it serves to explain the political unrest of such years as 1811-12, 1816, 1819, 1826, 1830-2, 1837, 1839-42, and 1847-8. In each of these cases a fairly direct connexion can be traced between unemployment and mass dissatisfaction. In the case of the Reform Bill, for example, to which Mathews's questioners were referring, there can be little doubt that the intense depression of the latter months of 1831 and the early months of 1832 contributed significantly to the pressures that led to its passage.

The activities of the Chartists, covering more than a decade, offer an interesting, if somewhat crude confirmation of this thesis. General business conditions reached a peak in 1836; 1837 was a year of severe depression; some recovery followed through 1838, to a second peak early in 1839. From the latter months of 1839 to the end of 1842 Britain suffered almost unbroken depression, exacerbated in its effects on the working classes by bad harvests. A recovery set in during 1843 which culminated in a peak in 1845. Business activity then declined to a low point in 1848. The phases of the most important Chartist activity occurred within severe depression; its temporary, but almost complete disappearance in 1843-5 coincides with the prosperity of those years.<sup>1</sup>

The three focal points of Chartist activity came in 1839, 1842, and 1848. Beginning in 1837 the Movement gradually grew to the point where a petition boasting some million and a quarter signatures was presented to Parliament in 1839.<sup>2</sup> The failure of this petition, and the Government's prosecution of the leaders, caused a temporary stagnation; but in 1842 a petition containing almost three and a third million names was placed in the hands of the Government.<sup>3</sup> In that year, too, the Chartists helped lead a series of bitter strikes, marked by extensive sabotage.

The wheat price fell, with the advent of a promising

<sup>1</sup> This relationship has been traced in detail by Preston W. Slosson, *The Decline of the Chartist Movement*, pp. 115-37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

harvest, in the summer of 1842, and in the following year recovery was under way. For the Chartists 'a long period of discouragement and inactivity followed', until the return of depression in 1846.<sup>1</sup> Still another petition went to Parliament in that year, and throughout 1847 the strength of the movement increased. Early in 1848 there were large meetings in the principal cities, climaxed by the presentation of the signatures of what purported to be almost six million British men and women.<sup>2</sup> Threats of direct action, however, failed to materialize, and, in the following years, prosperity and inadequate leadership brought the movement to an end.

The demand for universal suffrage at this period in British history patently had roots deeper than cyclical unemployment. The chronically depressed position of the hand-loom weavers, many of whom were Chartists, was also more than a cyclical problem. Yet, apparently, depression was required before the political doctrines of the Chartist leaders could command wide or effective support.

These examples by no means exhaust the possibility of tracing important links between short-run economic fluctuations and political and social events in the years 1790-1850. There are innumerable other cases which might usefully be examined from this perspective, and those traced here deserve more detailed analysis. Even these brief summaries, however, reveal the manner in which cyclical fluctuations and cost-of-living movements served to detonate and to give expression to the familiar underlying trends. They should also emphasize the distinctive economic, social, and political atmosphere of each year, or even different parts of the same year. The use of long-run conceptions like 'the growth of the Free-trade Movement', or the 'development of working-class organizations', or 'the Industrial Revolution' tends to blur this type of distinction. A necessary, but by no means sufficient requirement for a thorough interrelation of economic and other factors is a knowledge of fluctuations in general business activity and in costs of living.

<sup>1</sup> *The Decline of the Chartist Movement*, pp. 78 and 94.

<sup>2</sup> On close examination it was later estimated that about two million bona-fide signatures were attached to this final petition.

*A Note on the Statistics*

The indexes of imported and domestic prices used here have recently been constructed in the course of a study of *The Growth and Fluctuations of the British Economy, 1790-1850*, under the direction of Dr. Arthur D. Gayer. The Gilboy-Boody index appears in 'The Cost of Living and Real Wages in Eighteenth-Century England', *Review of Economic Statistics*, August 1936. The Silberling index is from 'British Prices and Business Cycles, 1779-1850', *Review of Economic Statistics*, 1923. The Tucker index is from 'Real Wages of Artisans in London, 1729-1935', *Journal of the American Statistical Society*, March 1936.

The business-cycle index is an outgrowth of an extensive history of business fluctuations (also a part of Dr. Gayer's study). Each year is rated from 0 (deep depression) to 5 (major peak). The ratings represent judgements made on the basis of all available statistical evidence, as well as a large body of qualitative material. In addition, an index of business activity was constructed containing some half-dozen of the more significant series. To present that index as a cyclical indicator would have required the abstraction of secular trends from each of the series; the index misrepresented business fluctuations at several points, in the light of wider information. It was thus decided to use the semi-descriptive chart presented here. It is similar in many respects to those compiled from Thorp's *Annals* by Gottfried Haberler (*Prosperity and Depression*). The wheat price is an annual average, derived from weekly quotations (1790-1834) in the *London Gazette* and (after 1834) monthly quotations in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

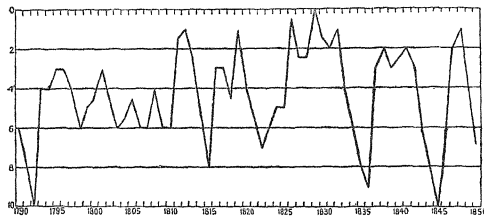
The so-called Social Tension Chart is of even more imaginative construction than the business-cycle index. The wheat price was first reduced to a 0 to 5 scale: 0 representing a year of abnormally high wheat price (and thus, like a 0 year in business activity, 'high social tension'), 5 representing a year of abnormally low wheat price. This abstraction of the wheat price was then added to the business-cycle pattern, and the total plotted inversely to a high wheat price and/or estimated severe unemployment thus tending to raise the level of the chart. This method makes the quite arbitrary judgement that cyclical unemployment and high food prices were equally responsible for unrest. Low wheat prices, of course, affected farmers unfavourably and probably, to a lesser extent, agricultural workers. At best, then, the Social Tension Chart summarizes influences operating on the industrial working classes.

It is perhaps unnecessary to emphasize the essentially approxi-



mate and descriptive nature of these calculations. They represent, however, a useful summary of a considerable body of evidence, and the results conform fairly well to qualitative political and social data. Intervals of 'high social tension' bred known symptoms of unrest,

SOCIAL TENSION CHART



which, in many cases, expressed themselves in important legislation or in the activities of the Luddites, the Chartists, and other groups: intervals of 'low social tension' saw these movements fade from sight, although the low wheat prices that helped create them often brought the agricultural interests clamouring to Parliament.

'Social Tension' and its Components

	Trade Cycle Pattern	Wheat Price (actual annual average: s. per quarter)	Wheat Price (abstracted; inverse)	'Social Tension' <sup>1</sup>
1790 . . . . .	3	50.5	3	6
1791 . . . . .	4	45.0	4	8
1792 . . . . .	5	41.2	5	10
1793 . . . . .	0	47.7	4	4
1794 . . . . .	1	51.8	3	4
1795 . . . . .	2½	74.1	½	3
1796 . . . . .	3	77.1	0	3
1797 . . . . .	0	52.8	4	4
1798 . . . . .	1	50.2	5	6
1799 . . . . .	3	67.6	2	5
1800 . . . . .	4	113.7	½	4½
1801 . . . . .	3	119.0	0	3
1802 . . . . .	5	67.2	4	9
1803 . . . . .	1	56.6	5	6
1804 . . . . .	1½	59.8	4	5½
1805 . . . . .	2½	87.5	2	4½

<sup>1</sup> 'Low social tension' is indicated by high figures in this index; this series is designed to be plotted inversely.

	Trade Cycle Pattern	Wheat Price (actual annual average: s. per quarter)	Wheat Price (abstracted; inverse)	'Social Tension'
1806 . . . . .	3	79.0	3	6
1807 . . . . .	2	73.3	4	6
1808 . . . . .	1	78.9	3	4
1809 . . . . .	4	95.4	2	6
1810 . . . . .	5	106.1	1	6
1811 . . . . .	0	94.6	1½	1½
1812 . . . . .	1	125.2	0	1
1813 . . . . .	1½	108.5	1	2½
1814 . . . . .	2½	73.9	3	5½
1815 . . . . .	3	64.2	5	8
1816 . . . . .	0	75.6	3	3
1817 . . . . .	3	94.8	0	3
1818 . . . . .	5	84.2	½	5½
1819 . . . . .	0	73.0	1	1
1820 . . . . .	1	65.6	3	4
1821 . . . . .	1½	54.3	4	5½
1822 . . . . .	2	43.2	5	7
1823 . . . . .	3	31.9	3	6
1824 . . . . .	4	62.1	1	5
1825 . . . . .	5	66.7	0	5
1826 . . . . .	0	56.9	½	½
1827 . . . . .	1	55.9	1	2½
1828 . . . . .	2	60.4	½	2½
1829 . . . . .	0	66.0	0	0
1830 . . . . .	1½	64.4	0	1½
1831 . . . . .	2	66.3	0	2
1832 . . . . .	0	58.7	1	1
1833 . . . . .	1	53.0	3	4
1834 . . . . .	2	46.3	4	6
1835 . . . . .	3	39.4	5	8
1836 . . . . .	5	48.4	4	9
1837 . . . . .	0	55.6	3	3
1838 . . . . .	1	64.3	1	2
1839 . . . . .	3	70.6	0	3
1840 . . . . .	2	66.2	½	2½
1841 . . . . .	1	64.3	1	2
1842 . . . . .	0	57.2	3	3
1843 . . . . .	1	50.2	5	6
1844 . . . . .	3	51.1	5	8
1845 . . . . .	5	50.9	5	10
1846 . . . . .	4	54.6	3	7
1847 . . . . .	2	69.3	0	2
1848 . . . . .	0	50.5	1	1
1849 . . . . .	1	44.2	3	4
1850 . . . . .	2	41.8	5	7