Time and Work in England, 1750–1830. *By Hans-Joachim Voth.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. viii + 312 pp. Figures. Cloth, $65. ISBN 0-199-24194-5.

Reviewed by Penelope J. Corfield

This is a bold, original, intelligent, and important book. It may perhaps be wrong, or it may be not completely right, for reasons that are discussed below. But its argument is constructed so carefully and its conclusions are so significant that, if successful refutations are to come, they will have to be presented to the same high standard.

Hans-Joachim Voth's analysis takes as its subject a central issue in the one of the great unresolved debates in British economic history. What stimulated industrialization and what did that mean for the country's workforce? The debates are mired in uncertainty for lack of data and complicated by basic disagreements about the time frame of change. Some historians dispute the entire case for rapid industrialization in later eighteenth-century England; Michael Fores dismisses the concept of "Industrial Revolution" as a myth. Others, however, persist with the classical terminology but still disagree mightily as to what was happening and why.

Into this contentious arena, Voth brings important new data and arguments. He is not particularly troubled with conceptual disputes. For him, England between 1750 and 1830 was undergoing "the Industrial Revolution," as he announces in his first sentence. But how did it happen? Historians discuss the economy's general output and the extent of capital input. The missing component is the contribution of labor.

Modern time-budget studies collect data on daily work patterns via a range of ingenious techniques of sociological survey, although none is perfect. Clearly, however, such inquiries cannot be undertaken retrospectively. Voth's alternative is to use witness statements made before the law courts. In effect, he takes people's accounts of where they were and what they were doing at the time of the crime as a proxy for the modern method of "random hour recall," when respondents are asked to remember their activities at a random time, chosen by the interviewer.

Here then is the raw material from which Voth constructs his analysis. He deploys 2,827 statements, of which a substantial majority (84.7 percent) were made by men. On the basis of their "kaleidoscope of snapshots" (p. 59), Voth constructs an average profile of the rhythms of daily life—throughout the day, the week, and the year. He does that for three different periods of history: 1749–1763, 1799–1803, and 1829–1830, and for two different regions, namely, London and six counties in the north of England.

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Of course, the data relate to times of work rather than to the nature of the work experience. But even that is much more than has previously been available. The picture that Voth generates is wonderfully rich and informative. He gives timetables for almost everything that happened during people's waking hours, from the (average) time of getting up in the morning to that of going to bed at night. He can calculate the most popular hours for taking tea (6:00 P.M. in 1800; 5:15 P.M. by 1830), for committing crimes (late afternoon), for social drinking (early evening), or for visiting prostitutes (late evening), although there were always exceptions to the rule. Indeed, Voth provides numerous little vignettes to demonstrate diversity. Work generally commenced very early in the day, to accommodate a working day of approximately twelve hours' length. However, experiences could differ by quite a margin. On November 12, 1800, for example, a north country agricultural laborer began his work in a potato field at the late hour of 10 A.M., although it remains unknown whether that timing was due to some special factor in the life of the laborer or to special conditions in the potato field or to something else again (the weather?).

Substantial sections of Voth's study are devoted to technical econometric calculations, which will be pored over by fellow devotees. However, everyone interested in this period of history should consult his general argument, and especially the long Chapter Three, "Patterns of Time-Use, 1750–1830" (pp. 59–160). Drawing all the threads together, Voth concludes that the major change during this period was an intensification of work throughout the year. The incidence of general holidays declined, especially in London between 1760 and 1800. Over the whole period, the average person's working hours per year are calculated to have risen by as much as 20 to 23 percent (see pp. 121–2, and Table 3.15 on p. 132). This picture seems to confirm Jan de Vries's interpretation of economic transformation as occurring not so much via a labor-saving technological revolution as via a labor-intensive "industrious revolution."

Before Voth's general results are accepted as set in stone, however, it is important to note some caveats. His case depends not just upon the general verisimilitude of his witnesses but also upon their real precision in matters of timing. It is far from clear, however, that the reports do not contain inaccuracies. The problems of good witness memory, considerably after the event (in London the mean lag between crime and court trial was 45.6 days in the 1750s, 39.2 days in 1800, and 38.2 days in 1830), are compounded by the variable nature of the editorial processes that went into the production of the eighteenth-century London crime reports for a "shock/horror" popular readership. Cool and calm social scientific research they were not.

Above all, however, the major problems relate to Voth's general conclusions about the working year. His calculations suggest that London saw a major surge in its length between 1760 and 1800. This might be described as a shift from a "preindustrial" to an "industrializing" pattern.

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The evidence from northern witnesses, however, showed a quite different picture. Already, in the 1750s they had an industrializing pattern of relatively few general holidays, and therefore they had little scope for an increase in the length of the working year thereafter. (These data are interesting, and perhaps surprising, as the six counties in the Northern Assize circuit were not all industrial areas by any means.)

Which regional pattern was more typical of the country as a whole? Voth aggregates all his material to create a national standard. He therefore makes no regional distinctions when he states unequivocally that “annual labour input grew by between a fifth and a quarter, between 1760 and 1831” (p. 270). That would only be true, however, if all the rest of the country matched the aggregated and weighted experience of these two areas. It is possible that London was the exception, and that everywhere else followed the north. Or vice versa. Or indeed that a third regional survey would show another version again. Furthermore, a choice of other years might have changed the picture too. In particular, 1800–01 (falling in the middle of Voth’s three snapshot periods) saw some of the highest prices of the entire period, while wage rates remained low. Such a state of affairs may well have encouraged workers on hourly rates to toil with extra intensity for very long hours; but this may have been an exceptional response to a particularly exceptional crisis.

Within the economy as a whole between 1750 and 1830, then, trends in the yearly workload still remain unclear. There may well have been a long-term change toward a more randomized pattern of rest days (which would not show in Voth’s sources) to counterbalance, at least in part, the fall in the number of general holidays. A shift to a “throughout-the-year” economy did not automatically mean that individuals worked nonstop throughout the twelve months, any more than the present-day shift to a “throughout-the-week” economy means that everyone today works nonstop for seven days a week.

Moreover, even if Voth’s figures are accepted, his analysis of the causation of change still needs debating. He stresses that England’s industrialization was fueled not so much by increases in productivity as by high labor input from sheer hard work (pp. 234, 268, 270–1). His own figures, however, have located the major lengthening of the working year before 1800. Hence, at the very least, England’s continuing growth after 1800 cannot be explained by a rise in labor input—an extra “push” from the toiling masses—for after 1800 Voth’s data imply that there was nothing more to give. Other factors were also in play. Consequently, those in a hurry to promote economic growth should not conclude that “sweating” the labor force more intensely is enough on its own to generate economic transformation.

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Voth's stimulating book, however, is correct in highlighting the need to know more about the contribution of labor. *Time and Work* ends with a call for more research into the nature of work itself, recalling Adam Smith's pertinent remark that it is really what is done in work, as much as the length of time at work, that counts. Historians from all sectors of the Industrial Revolution debates can agree on that.

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