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Michael Huberman. *Escape from the Market: Negotiating Work in Lancashire.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xviii + 222 pp. $54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-56151-8.

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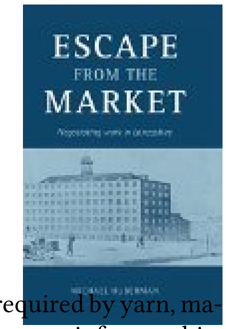

In *Escape From the Market*, Michael Huberman argues that even in the years before 1850 the textile labor market of Lancashire was not a spot market, but instead was characterized by a measure of worker autonomy. He brings together a great deal of the recent economic literature on labor markets and combines it with recent work on the social history of the Lancashire textile industry, much of it his own. The book is a useful summary of Huberman's articles in this area.

Huberman has made many important contributions. The first is new data. These include output figures for one of the largest fine spinning firms in Lancashire, M'Connell and Kennedy; disaggregated British yarn production data; and refined and more complete measures of short-time working in the 1840s which illustrate that this practice was widespread at an earlier point in time than is commonly believed. What I found most intriguing about his analysis is the distinctions he draws between the labor markets in the coarse and fine spinning sections of the industry, and the somewhat overlapping categories of rural and urban. The "negotiating work" of the subtitle and the labor empowerment it implies refer primarily to the fine spinning sections, or what he calls the "primary sector". He argues that in the coarse or "secondary" sector wages remained low and flexible because skill levels and management's capital investments were low (at least until 1850, when the self-mover was more widely adopted). Labor's disadvantageous bargaining position in the sector was further eroded because coarse spinning was predominantly located in the rural areas where the family was the work unit and management had an essentially captive labor market, thus harking back to the work of Gavin Wright on southern U.S. textile labor markets. Huberman also discusses the origins of the Lancashire lists–documents drawn up by labor and management which specified the payments required by yarn, machine and cotton type. These lists have an infamous history as an impediment to technological change. But this literature treats the lists as an exogenous factor. To my knowledge no one before Huberman has tried to consider the reasons for their creation.

Though the book touches on many issues affecting the Lancashire labor market in the first half of the 19th century, Huberman's main theme appears to be that because of collective action by the male workers in fine spinning, management was forced to adopt a "fair management" strategy in the 1830s. The actions which brought management to their knees were the 1829 strike in the fine spinning sections, and the ability of workers to retaliate for "unfair" management actions by slowing down production. According to Huberman, such slowdowns were possible in the fine spinning sections because of the introduction of new technology (e.g. longer mules) with unknown maximum capabilities. To elicit maximum effort, management adopted a strategy of "fairness". As described by Huberman, this strategy involved high and stable wages, and stable employment. To keep employment stable, management adjusted labor input through the use of short-time rather than layoffs, and when layoffs were necessary, applied seniority rules. Huberman, however, goes further than the data support in ascribing market control to labor. Alternative explanations are dismissed or ignored. This is less of a problem when he is considering overt labor strategies of control. The power labor exhibited in the strike of 1829 is unambiguous, and labor's role in the adoption of the lists marks another strong element in Huberman's analysis. The problems lie more in Huberman's attempts to infer evidence of labor's day-to-day workplace control from the data.

One example of such a problem is Huberman's attempt to show that management adopted stable wages in response to demand shocks after 1830. His theoretical analysis of this issue is sound. He argues that if managers have undertaken some type of implicit contract with workers then management would try to mitigate the variance of the wage over the course of the business cycle. Because they were not lowering wages, and consequently prices, in response to negative demand shocks, output would fall. Thus, in downturns, quantity would tend to vary more and prices less in the presence of such contracts than in their absence. In the empirical section, I expected him to stress differences in relative price and quantity variation in the fine spinning section–where he believes these contracts were adopted in the 1830s–and the coarse spinning sections–where he argues they did not exist until the end of his period (the sample stretches from 1822 to 1852). Indeed, the (1991) *Explorations in Economic History* article from which this section is drawn sets out a formal model contrasting wage and output variations in the fine and coarse sectors. But he does not find cross-sectoral differences. The relative price and quantity variations in the two sectors were virtually identical. In all sectors, throughout the time period, prices vary less than quantity in the "bad", or below-trend growth years, and in "good", or above-trend years, prices vary more than quantity. This Huberman takes as evidence of wage smoothing and so of "the fair wage policy". Why? This result is not implied by the model he relies on. Further, it is a pattern seen across all periods, and all sectors, when his analysis would suggest that the "fair wage policy" was only extant in fine spinning, and then only in the post-1830 period.

On the whole, I did not find Huberman's arguments concerning the adoption of "fair" wages and "fair management practices" convincing. But anyone must be convinced by his work that labor had at least some bargaining power over employers if for no other reason than workers could present a credible strike threat. Huberman also demonstrates that management was reluctant to layoff workers if for no other reason than a fear of losing trained labor. Huberman is successful in showing that the neoclassical paradigm of perfectly flexible labor markets was as inappropriate to early 19th century labor markets as it is to those of the late 20th century.

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