THE PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS, AND ECONOMICS REVIEW

CONTENTS

CRITICAL JUNCTURE THEORY AND THE REPEAL OF THE BRITISH CORN LAWS

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Traditional historical institutionalist explanations for the repeal of the British Corn Laws tend to be somewhat vague. I suggest that Critical Juncture Theory offers a more refined way of providing an explanation, and using the concepts of Permissive and Productive conditions I sketch an account of the Repeal. Critical Juncture theory also suffers from problems, and I endeavor to remedy them using guidelines from Hogan (2006). Using this method, Repeal is found to qualify as a Critical Juncture quite readily. While some ambiguities and theoretical questions remain,

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

1. Introduction

The repeal of the 1815 Corn Laws, which imposed an average duty of 28% on imported grain (Irwin and Chepeliev 2021) in 1846 was an extremely controversial political issue in nineteenth-century Britain, fracturing the governing Conservative Party and setting the scene for Britain's adoption of near-complete free trade (Nicholson 1904), which was to last until the Great Depression.

An enduring puzzle is why the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, repealed the Laws against the wishes of much of his own party, and also why Britain remained so committed to free trade thereafter, despite an 'invasion' of cheap foreign grain later in the century. The existing literature tends to emphasize some combination of interests, institutions and ideas in forcing Repeal. However, explanations of how these factors operated and interrelated as causal mechanisms are often left unclear, when they are given at all.

I propose to use Critical Juncture Theory to remedy this explanatory gap, arguing that long-term changes to the British economy as a result of the Industrial Revolution acted as a 'Permissive Condition' for restructuring British politics in favor of workers and manufacturers over farmers and landowners. Only with this consideration in place could 'Productive Conditions,' like financial interests and political ideology, combine to force the Conservative government to embrace the cause of Repeal. The decision to adopt free trade was then 'locked in' and was retained even as British agriculture suffered and other countries adopted protectionist policies later in the 19th century.

I test my account using Hogan's (2006) framework, which aims to set out rigorous conditions to test for the presence of a Critical Juncture. I find that Repeal does indeed qualify as a Critical Juncture, but that some theoretical problems remain which are arguably inherent to the subject matter. Overall, solving the puzzle of Repeal enables us to situate Repeal in the broader context of changes produced by the Industrial Revolution, and provides insight into how legislatures' decision-making on divisive issues can be studied more effectively.

2. The Puzzle of the Shift Towards Repeal

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

Sir Robert Peel and his followers to support Repeal in 1845-46 seems a strange one.

First, as representatives of the landed interest, his party was strongly protectionist; voting against a pro-Repeal motion in Parliament by 308-1 as late as 1844 (Irwin 1989), and its members stood most to lose from Repeal, particularly the unelected landowning members of the House of Lords (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006). In this period, the wealthiest 10% of the population drew 23% of its income from land rents, benefiting from the high price of grain enjoyed by farmers due to the Corn Laws (Irwin and Chepeliev 2021).

Second, Repeal split the Conservative Party, with around one-third supporting Repeal, causing the collapse of the government in the summer of 1846 and leaving the Party unable to form a long-lasting administration for decades (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006).

Another puzzle is why, given that Repeal failed to substantially lower food prices (Irwin and Chepeliev 2021), the government did not act to protect the agricultural sector when it became seriously threatened by cheap American grain imports later in the century. Ensor (1936) writes that British agriculture after 1877 lost its position as the most technologically advanced in Europe, and steadily lost workers to the industrial sector and emigration, particularly farmers who worked grain-suboptimal land or were unable to readjust to lower prices post-Repeal (Vugt 1988). This development occurred against a backdrop of increasing protectionism elsewhere in Europe, including for agriculture (Pickering and Tyrrell 2000; Ensor 1936).

3. The Current Literature

Central to the current debate on Repeal are the relative importance of interests, ideas, and institutions. Typical of this is Schonhardt-Bailey (2006), who holds that these three factors combined to make Repeal possible. She believes that a widely popular ideology made the pro-Repeal Anti-Corn Law League effective, while also providing an impetus for Peel's followers to deviate from traditional Conservative doctrine, that the increasing interest of industrialists in Repeal and the decreasing interest of landowners in protectionism encouraged politicians to back Repeal, while institutions, particularly Parliament and public officialdom, were increasingly cognizant of the wide unpopularity of the Corn Laws in public opinion when making policy decisions.

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

plains his decision as springing from a political interest in preserving the institutional status quo of government against greater democratization. Pickering and Tyrell (2000) stress the importance of the Anti-Corn Law League (founded in 1836), which combined opposition to the unpopular policy with sophisticated organization—it was distributing over nine million pieces of literature annually by 1843 and had become, at least in theory, a formidable political force in getting pro-Repeal candidates elected to Parliament. Meanwhile, Lusztig (1995) denigrates the importance of economic ideology, pointing out that Adam Smith's Neoclassical economic theory was well established long before the passage of the Corn Laws, and that Smith himself admitted that national security justified protectionism in some cases.

These historical institutionalist explanations suffer from a lack of clarity over how these factors relate, especially temporally. For instance, Schonhardt-Bailey (2006) states that industrialization facilitated the Repeal movement, but does not make explicit how this long-term, facilitating factor related causally to the interests, ideas and institutions that actually forced the government to adopt Repeal. There is also the problem of overlap between the factors: Parliament had indeed become institutionally more amenable to Repeal, but this was a result of ideology and interests, according to Schonhardt-Bailey (2006). The influence of these seems to have been indirect and complex in operation, at least with regard to policy-making by civil servants, explored by Brown (1958) in her study of the turn of the government Board of Trade against protectionism.

Hence, this traditional approach renders the three factors chimerical, their precise causal effects are frequently left unclear, and the distinctions between them are blurred and somewhat arbitrary—rendering it difficult to decide what factor, if any, was the ultimate cause of Repeal. This inherent lack of clarity over causal mechanisms can be remedied by Critical Juncture theory (Fiorestos et al. 2016; Skocpol 1979).

4. Critical Juncture Theory

In response to lack of clarity regarding Repeal, I propose to use critical juncture theory as refined by Soifer (2012) and Hogan (2006). Critical juncture theory is invoked to explain periods when institutional development takes a new path, typically over a short period (Capoccia 2016; Hall and Taylor 1996). Institutions are assumed to be normally stable and

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

changes are possible, and the choices made during these periods set institutions on a given 'trajectory', closing off previously open alternatives (Capoccia and Keleman 2007).

Soifer (2012) distinguishes between the permissive and productive conditions required to cause a critical juncture. permissive conditions produce a "loosening of the constraints of structure" necessary for institutional transformation to occur (1573). Hence, permissive conditions "change the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency", creating the opportunity for productive conditions to cause a change in policy (Soifer 2012, 1574).

Productive conditions (such as interests or ideas) "operate within the possibility space" created by the permissive conditions to produce a certain outcome (1575). The institutional change produced in a critical juncture will persevere over time in a path-dependent fashion (Soifer 2012): the initial alteration will remain even when suboptimal outcomes result, (Fiorestos et al. 2016; North 1991), as was the case with post-Repeal British agriculture.

The second element of my analysis is supplied by Hogan (2006). He sets out a framework of broad standards for classifying events as critical junctures; identifying 'generative cleavage' and the requirement that change be "significant, swift, and encompassing" (Hogan 2006, 664) as criteria. He defines 'generative cleavage' as unanticipated events that provoke change, essentially playing the role we assigned to productive conditions, and the 'encompassing' nature of a critical juncture as affecting "all, or most, of those who have an interest in the institution or institutions it is impacting upon" (666). He also cites the need for relevant and clearly defined measurement of the change to test its significance that is nonetheless relevant to the subject at hand, rejecting the notion of incremental change on the basis that change must be quick to be radical.

In the next section, I apply Soifer's critical juncture theory to construct an account of the repeal of the Corn Laws, and then test the explanation using Hogan's framework. This approach allows us to see the ideas and interests that acted to produce Repeal as 'temporally nested' within broader patterns of change, which makes for greater conceptual clarity and places Repeal into a wider context of political change induced by the Industrial Revolution, rather than being a mere historical anomaly.

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

The political and economic change caused by the Industrial Revolution created Permissive conditions that favored Repeal in three ways: it created an environment in which the impact of the Corn Laws was felt across the entire country, it increased the wealth and influence of industry at the expense of agriculture, and it increased wage inequality, which caused vulnerability to price fluctuations (Allen 2015).

5.1 Wage Inequality

According to Allen (2009), the Industrial Revolution began in Britain because wages were high and energy (in the form of coal) was cheap, so that there was an incentive to develop energy-intensive labor-saving technology. Allen argues that this ultimately led to unemployment and lower wages as employers attempted to minimize labor costs, particularly in the textile industry.

Although the role of high wages in causing the Industrial Revolution has been challenged by Stephenson (2018), who finds fault with Allen's wage data, Allen seems to be on firmer ground when he argues that the position of workers declined in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Studying the subsistence ratios (income divided by the cost of maintaining a family at a minimum level of consumption) of handloom weavers, agricultural workers, and building laborers from 1770-1860, Allen (2015) finds that the income of these groups diverged widely from the 1780s. Handloom weaver's wages fell from being comparatively high in the 1770s to "bare bones subsistence" post-1830, while agricultural workers saw only a moderate increase (but were earning three times as much as the weavers by 1840), and building laborers ultimately doubled their real earnings by 1850 (Allen 2015, 19).

Feinstein (1998) provides a similar picture of economic stagnation for the average working-class family, with living standards improving by only 10-15% during the entire 1780-1850 period. Combined with the high proportion of income spent on food: 42% for the bottom 90% of the populace (Irwin and Chepeliev 2021), this meant that many consumers were vulnerable to fluctuations in food prices (Nicholson 1904).

This was especially true after 1828, when the absolute prohibition of grain imports in times of plenty was replaced by a complex 'sliding-scale' of tariffs, with the tariff calculat-

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

As a result, merchants hoarded the grain in warehouses until the duty was as low as possible (Fay, 1921), at a period when transportation costs could double or triple year to year (Sharp 2010). Also, despite this modification, the duties could still be sufficiently high to make imports effectively impossible, as occurred in 1834-36, during which the amount of wheat imported totaled 2,428 quarters, compared to the 166,128 imported in 1832 alone (Sharp 2010).

The resulting high wheat prices in years of domestic scarcity (though the Corn Laws also covered other grains, like barley and oats) were a particular grievance given wheat bread's importance in worker's diets: inability to afford it was a mark of poverty (Pickering and Tyrrell 2000). Hence, these circumstances created an environment in which productive conditions could successfully force Repeal, especially with poor harvests and famine in Ireland in the 1840s (Sharp 2010).

As an aside, it is noteworthy that the only area in Europe with a similar level of industrialization relative to agriculture, Belgium, was the only other country in Europe to refrain from implementing grain tariffs in the 1870s as a response to the influx of cheap American grain—although it is perhaps more debatable whether the Belgian case can be classed as a critical juncture, of which more later (Van Dijck and Truyts 2014).

5.2 Increased Importance of the Export Industry

At this period, the Industrial Revolution was also making free trade, and by extension, the Corn Laws, a matter of national, rather than regional, interest. This development was partly enabled because of the concentration of Britain's powerful textile export industry in Lancashire (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006). Lancashire was uniquely suited for the industry because of its cheap coal (Balderston 2010) and the resulting industrial concentration made organizing pressure groups easier. The Anti-Corn Law League's staunchest support came from Lancashire towns, especially in its base in Manchester (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006; Pickering and Tyrrell 2000).

This was important because the Lancashire exporters had a direct interest in Repeal: they argued that if foreign countries became more prosperous as a result of exporting wheat to Britain, they could purchase more British manufactured goods cheaper than their own,

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

and 37% market share respectively (Irwin and Chepeliev 2021)), support for Repeal became a rational strategy for the export industry (James and Lake 1989).

Pincus (1975), by contrast, argues that more locationally dispersed industries are more successful at lobbying since they are not associated with a single interest. After 1830, the export industry met this criterion as Britain's exports as a share of industrial output had been steadily increasing (Esteban 1997) with attendant diversification and dispersal of export-oriented trade all over the nation, not just Lancashire, where textiles remained concentrated (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006).

Hence, by 1846 Pro-Repeal interests enjoyed the double advantage of a concentrated and dominant textile export industry while the broader export sector was spreading its activities wider, so that the cause of Repeal could call upon a nationwide pool of support and avoid appearing as a merely self-interested textile export lobby group (Schonhardt-Bailey 1991).

5.3 Increased Influence of Industry

Although the Industrial Revolution was actually a gradual process, it altered the balance of the British economy in favor of industry over agriculture (Hoppit 1987, 215). This meant that the landed aristocracy, who benefited from the Corn Laws, faced competition for political dominance from newly wealthy factory owners, bankers, and merchants, who made up 27% of the House of Commons by 1831 (Jupp 1990). The reasons for this were twofold: first, firms were becoming larger and more capital-intensive with the advent of mechanization (Howe 1984). These barriers to entry for other firms meant that the existing large ones (which employed an average of 400 workers each by the 1830s) had more to gain from Repeal-induced higher profits (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006).

Second, the Industrial Revolution caused legislative institutions to become increasingly corrupt and unrepresentative due to changing demographics. Populous new industrial towns such as Manchester and Birmingham had no parliamentary representation, while formerly populous constituencies with tiny electorates (called 'rotten boroughs') did (Lizzeri and Persico 2004). The Government had given way to pressure to improve this situation with the passage of the Reform Act of 1832, which redrew electoral boundaries and

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

Federico (2012) states that the Act did not directly cause Repeal, pointing out that the 1828 'sliding-scale' modification was introduced by an unreformed Parliament, and that in any case the Corn Laws would not be repealed for another fourteen years. However, it represented a major concession by the aristocracy and raised the possibility that more would follow (Wasson 1980).

This concession created a more favorable environment for institutional change, as the landowning elite's bargaining position became much more vulnerable; they would have to make concessions to the new industrial interest (who had been the main beneficiaries of the franchise extension (Lizzeri and Persico 2004)) or face further Reform (Lusztig 1995).

6. Productive Conditions

The permissive conditions created by the Industrial Revolution did not automatically produce Repeal, they merely created a favorable environment for it. Rather, it required productive conditions to actually produce the outcome that the permissive conditions made possible (Soifer 2012). Following historical institutionalist theory, we shall examine both the conditions of interest groups and ideas as well as the impact of institutions (Hall and Taylor 1996).

6.1 Interest Groups

The most important pro-Repeal interest group, the Anti-Corn Law League, exploited the favorable configuration of Britain's industry with highly effective lobbying. Led by Radical politicians Richard Cobden and John Bright, it had a centralized and sophisticated administrative structure, with district branches subordinate to headquarters in Manchester, and full-time clerical staff and fundraising agents (McCord 1959).

This administrative structure allowed it to raise large sums of money, mainly via subscriptions and collections (over £116,000 in 1845 alone), much of which came from owners of large cotton firms who believed they would benefit from Repeal (Howe 1984; McCord 1959). The money was invested in producing its own newspapers, advertising, and political tracts, as well as paying speakers to hold rallies and other fundraisers (Pickering and

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

Garden Theater in London, where the "profuse forms of Victorian commodity culture" (Gurney 2006, 385) produced by British industry were displayed, including cloth, ironwork, cutlery, and pottery, complete with refreshments, bands, and a raffle. It was extremely effective at drawing publicity and as a fundraiser, raising over £25,000 (Pickering and Tyrrell 2000; McCord 1959). The League also ran voter registration campaigns in the hope of influencing elections, and although this proved to be somewhat inefficient, it forced Members of Parliament to take greater account of their constituents' interests in Repeal (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006; McCord 1959).

This success was complemented by the weakness of the League's opponents, notably the Central Agricultural Protection Society (or 'Anti-League') founded in 1844 by Robert Baker to uphold the Corn Laws (Lawson-Tancred 1960). However, it faced problematic divisions amongst its supporters. These were a heterogeneous mixture of poor tenant farmers and aristocratic landowners who had few interests in common and who found it difficult to co-operate—partly because landowners feared mobilizing the unfranchised electorate, who might later demand democratic reforms (Mosse 1947).

This disunity of purpose was matched by lack of organizational efficiency, as it had little support from Conservative parliamentarians, its central committee was weak and dependent on local branches, and its attempts to convert the urban working class to Protectionism was half-hearted (Lawson-Tancred 1960; Mosse 1947). Indeed, Mosse (1947, 134) calls it "doomed to failure" owing to its reluctance to match the League's radical tactics. This lack of proactivity from wealthy potential donors and supporters may have been caused by the diversification of the landed elite's income sources. By 1846 profits from land rent were not their only source of income, so that their interest in retaining the Corn Laws was weakening (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006).

6.2 Ideas

Ideology was closely linked to the effectiveness of pro-Repeal interests. The Anti-Corn Law League drew upon the theories of Neoclassical political economists, such as Smith and Ricardo (Pickering and Tyrrell 2000), who argued that the Corn Laws dragged resources into agriculture, so that Britain could not use its comparative advantage in producing manufactured goods, that it caused excessive variability in grain prices, and that it de-

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

imagery to appeal to the religious, particularly the Nonconformist, middle class. Speakers at its rallies regularly denounced the political dominance of the aristocracy and landowners using quotations from the Bible, along with public commemorations of the victims of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, who had been killed by soldiers while protesting for universal suffrage (Pickering and Tyrrell 2000).

Ideas also played a key role in the landowning elite's acceptance of repeal. The pro-Repeal 'Peelite' Conservatives believed that rather than obstructing change, the Conservative Party should reform governmental institutions as a means of perpetuating them, as outlined in Peel's 1834 Tamworth Manifesto (Hedeen 2015). Moreover, despite their reputation as a Protectionist party, Conservative MPs did not necessarily hold staunch ideologically Protectionist economic views.

Instead, many saw the Corn Laws more as an issue of national security after the Napoleonic Wars (Gambles 1999). This concern was partly drawn from the economist Thomas Malthus (1815), who not only feared the effects of Repeal on farmers, but also foreign countries' interference with imported grain supplies should Britain become dependent on them. It could be argued that the long peace following the Napoleonic Wars and the readier availability of grain from the colonies, particularly from Canada (Jones 1941) diminished such concerns, at least in the arena of public debate.

Also, as Schonhardt-Bailey (2006) remarks, the unelected House of Lords could have chosen to veto Repeal; especially since the Lords regarded themselves as upholding the aristocratic "territorial constitution" against popular demands for greater democratization (228) . However, ideological desire to maintain the British constitution meant that they voted in favor of Repeal, fearing a popular revolution if they refused (Lusztig 1995).

Similar beliefs prompted Peel to move towards Repeal in the first place; he thought that the 1832 Reform Act had set a dangerous precedent of lobby groups influencing Parliament's decisions, and hence decided to launch a "preemptive strike against… agitation for constitutional reform" (Lusztig 1995, 396). Indeed, the organizers of the Anti-Corn Law League encouraged this assessment by openly associating with the radical Chartist movement, which pushed for even more extensive Parliamentary reform (Pickering and Tyrrell 2000).

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

Of course, the institutional design of Parliament played a major role as the existence of regular elections compelled MPs to take stock of their constituents' views, and indeed Schonhardt-Bailey (2006) believes this provided the means for constituents to pressurize their MPs into supporting Repeal—the Peelites being particularly susceptible to this as their constituencies tended to contain more pro-free trade interests.

However, pro-Repeal interests were able to take advantage of other institutions as well, particularly the Post Office. Reforms under the previous administration (in 1840) allowing for cheaper postage were welcomed by pro-Repeal lobbyists, as it facilitated the mass mailing campaigns that the Anti-Corn Law League came to depend on (Jordan 1965). Meanwhile, attempts by the government to use the Post Office against known radicals backfired spectacularly; the Home Secretary was lampooned in the 1845 bazaar after the revelation that he had ordered the opening of notable political radicals' letters (Pickering and Tyrell 2000).

Brown (1958) finds that by the 1830s, pro-Repeal ideology had become entrenched in the Civil Service, particularly the Board of Trade, which dealt with foreign commerce and customs, though primarily in advising other departments. She shows that the Board cooperated extensively with pro-Repeal MPs in the 1840 Select Committee on Export Duties, giving its expert opinion that freer trade was desirable, for reasons as diverse as reducing the incentives to smuggle goods, improving general economic growth, and because they believed some industries simply no longer required protection.

These conclusions were lent an air of urgency because Britain had suffered a run of failed commercial negotiations from the 1830s onward both within Europe and elsewhere, particularly in the Americas, which the Board of Trade largely blamed on ill will created by British protectionism (Brown 1958).

It might be thought strange that the extensive array of colonial or colony-related institutions in the Britain of the 1840s did not exert more influence against Repeal. Gambles (1999) has shown that empire formed an integral part of Conservative economic thinking, and in particular, they were key supporters of the monopolistic government of the East India Company (EIC) against the liberalizing objections of the Whigs.

Several factors rendered the weight of colonial institutions in the debate negligible. Although colonial interests found some influential spokesmen in Parliament, they were

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

fected (Jones 1941)—so that powerful colonial institutions like the EIC had less reason to partake in the debate.

Moreover, even those domestic industries which were generally strongly protectionist, such as the shipping industry, tended not to extend their lobbying activities outside their immediate interests so that a broad-based protectionist coalition never came into being (Brown 1958).

7. Summary and Further Problems

A critical juncture theory account of Repeal proceeds as follows. The interests and ideas behind Repeal could operate at maximum effectiveness due to the permissive conditions discussed above, while their opponents' were badly disadvantaged. Under the pressure of the productive conditions, the protectionist elites were compelled to compromise to protect the political status quo. Their acceptance of Repeal was only a part of their gradual adaptation to the political changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution (Jupp 1990), such that the House of Commons voted to repeal the Corn Laws by 327 votes to 229 in May 1846, followed by its acceptance in the House of Lords (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006).

The institutional structure had been so changed by the Industrial Revolution that even the Conservatives found it politically impossible to reintroduce Protectionism during the agricultural depression of the 1870s (Blake 1998). The decision of 1846 was 'locked in' by path dependency. As Ensor (1936, 118) put it: "England, being now the workshop of the world, staked her future upon continuing to be."

Attractive as this story may be, a number of observations are appropriate. First, we have no way of falsifying this account. Once we have decided to view Repeal, or any other event, through a 'critical juncture' lens, there is little or no empirical evidence that could prove that we were wrong to label the event as such.

Second, we have no real way of comparing the 'Repeal critical juncture' with other critical junctures that might have occurred at other times and places, as we lack an objective set of criteria that can determine whether a particular event can be classified as one.

Third, as a result of the previous two points, there is little use for critical juncture theory

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

these reasons, we must proceed to test our account of Repeal against the criteria set out by Hogan (2006).

8. Testing the Critical Juncture Account

In light of the above problems with the unquestioning labeling of Repeal as a critical juncture, we shall now apply Hogan's (2006) tests of significance, rapidity, and encompassing nature of the resulting change to see whether it qualifies as one.

8.1 Significance of Change

Hogan stresses the need for measurements of change, fitted to the case at hand, to test for significance. There are, of course, many criteria that could be used, particularly if Repeal is considered as part of Britain's wider shift towards free trade, but for brevity, we shall focus exclusively on the direct changes as a result of Repeal.

Hence, perhaps the greatest obstacle to classifying Repeal as a critical juncture is the relatively limited economic impact it seemed to have on society at large, as demonstrated by Irwin and Chepeliev (2021). They find that although Repeal was a progressive policy that benefited the bottom 90% of society, the benefit was not particularly large: a 0.3-0.6% increase in welfare, mostly due to higher real wages (a decrease of 1.4% was found for the top 10%, primarily caused by falling land rents). The central problem was that foreign countries did not produce enough grain for export to drastically lower grain prices, although Vamplew (1980) finds that domestic cereal production did decline post-Repeal at least partially because of cheaper imports.

Moreover, tariff reduction was by no means a panacea guaranteed to improve welfare. Irwin (1988) argues that unilateral removal of protection could well have made Britain worse off, and that only reciprocal reduction of duties by other nations could ensure that Britain benefited. The effect was much more ambiguous than the free trade reformers made out, so much so that by 1850 some economists were advocating a return to protection if international reciprocity was not forthcoming.

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

been frosty. The latter group saw the struggle for free trade as a pernicious distraction from the fundamental issue of increasing the franchise (McCord, 1959).

The two causes ended up developing substantial unity, at least in the minds of the nervous governing classes (Schonhardt-Bailey 2006). The 'non-Peelite' protectionist wing of the Conservative party was left largely in the political wilderness, unable to form a majority government until their election victory in 1874 under Disraeli, which was likely made possible by the party's abandonment of protectionism after about 1852 (Gambles 1999). The impact on the agricultural sector was also very real, although this seems to have been initially obscured by a period of overall improvement in the 1850s, in the form of increased emigration of farmers who worked relatively poorer and undercapitalized land, and who were less able to adapt to Repeal (Vugt 1988).

Repeal also, in the 1870s, encouraged cheap American grain imports which, according to Musson (1959, 225), "destroyed the balance of the British economy" and squeezed the agricultural sector so severely as to cause average farmers' income to fall by 40%. Despite the decreasing importance of agriculture in this period, such distress must have had a depressing effect upon the wider economy.

8.2 Rapidity of Change

Corn Law Repeal readily meets the condition that change must be rapid, not incremental. After 1846, succeedingWhigs or Peelite governments quickly dismantled what remained of the old mercantilist system—the most important being the Navigation Acts in 1849 (Grampp 1987). However, the clearest indication of a Critical Juncture is the rapidity with which Conservatives of all stripes accommodated themselves to free trade. A slow policy shift towards free trade had indeed been in progress since 1820, including among Conservatives (Grampp 1987), but this shift was markedly gradual, with emphasis on reduction and reform of duties rather than outright abolition, as exemplified in the Conservative 1828 modification of the Corn Laws, which reduced the duties levied and introduced the 'sliding scale' mechanism (Federico 2012).

The pressure that forced Peel to abandon protection completely was quite different. His liberalization of the Corn Laws in 1842-43 had its origin in concerns about the British

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

rapid realization that Repeal might be the "thin end of an ever-thickening 'democratic' wedge", as well as an electoral stumbling block (Gambles 1999, 231).

A word here could be inserted on the level of persistence of change alongside rapidity. Once adopted, free trade became a staple of British policy until 1931, when the Great Depression provoked a shift towards a protectionist, inter-colonial 'Imperial Preference' regime (de Bromhead et al. 2019). This meant, as mentioned earlier, Britain's case was unusual among European countries because of its industrialized state, with only Belgium having similarly favorable conditions for early industrial development, as well as a similar propensity towards agricultural free trade.

However, even Belgium, although it rejected grain tariffs at the behest of its industrial workforce, still implemented duties on meat and livestock in 1887, so that British adherence to the free trade 'shift' was far more persistent than that of even comparable European nations (Van Dijck and Truyts 2014). Other, less comparable, European countries, like France, quickly adopted free trade during its heyday in the 1860s with the famous Cobden-Chevalier Treaty, but then abruptly turned back to protectionism in the 1880s and continued to adhere to it until World War I (Federico 2012).

8.3 Encompassing Nature of Change

Hogan argues that a certain minimum proportion of the actors involved must be affected; it could also be argued that they must be affected to a certain minimum extent (though this does dovetail with significance). Given the limited empirical data available, this is difficult to assess. However, the effect of Repeal on the agricultural sector alone could arguably meet the 'encompassing' requirement, given that it employed 23.5% of the labor force in 1851, which was over half of the share of the industrial sector (Broadberry et al. 2013).

Furthermore, wheat growing was particularly bound up with Repeal, and, as shown by Heblich et al. (2022), farmland suitable for wheat as opposed to grazing covered much of England, in particular the east and south, and rural poverty increased and property value tended to fall across these considerable areas in the aftermath of Repeal. It should be noted that this evidence does not include other important grains that the Corn Laws applied

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

cal power of the landed gentry, and the ensuing blow to that power affected all social strata (Kemp 1962).

Given Britain's large share of international trade, Repeal should also have affected the trade policies of other nations as well. James and Lake (1989) find this was indeed so in the United States, where Britain's move to free trade shifted the balance of interests in favor of tariff reduction until the Civil War. Free trade also spread to Europe, beginning with the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty between Britain and France negotiated by Anti-Corn Law League organizer Richard Cobden.

An element of path-dependency is introduced by Federico (2012), who speculates that the heyday of general (not just agricultural) free trade in the 1860s encouraged industrialists across Europe who had been deprived of protection to support low grain prices for their workforces so that British industrialists who supported Repeal required a free grain trade more than ever once duties on their manufactured goods were eliminated later. This direct influence of Repeal on the large British agricultural sector, and its more indirect influence on international trade thus appears to meet the criterion of encompassing change.

9. Conclusion

Critical juncture theory enables us to understand Repeal not only as a product of interests, institutions, and ideas, but also to situate it within a broader set of historical developments created by the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, its classification as a critical juncture can be placed on a more objective footing using Hogan's (2006) conditions, under which the classification holds firm.

Of course, some theoretical problems still remain. For instance, it would not be idle to ask whether the highly particular characteristics of a given historical event (and indeed the vantage point from which it is studied) make anything possible other than fairly basic generalization when making comparisons with other events. It could also be debated whether the traditional interests, ideas, and institutions' method of delineating permissive and productive conditions is too rigid, and that the problem of the interconnectedness of these factors persists even when the Permissive-Productive division is in place.

Nonetheless, Critical juncture theory still provides some framework for useful comparison

Previous: Fair Equality of Opportunity and Strong Affirmative Action

Next: Author Information

experience with grain tariffs), and yields a substantial improvement on the conventional accounts' unclearness on the temporal situation of the causes of historical change.

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