

Technology's Demands and the Sacrifice It Spurs: Why Working Classes Lose

“All of us really owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel” (Orwell, 35). Orwell could not have been more correct. In his novel *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell proclaimed that the advancement of technology was an unstoppable force that must be accepted (Orwell, 98). Orwell's accounts of coal miners in his work reveal a troubling reality: the advancement of technology has created a reliance on fuel, and this fuel has to be amassed in massive quantities. The working classes, specifically miners, gather this fuel, and through its inevitable progression, technology places the miners in a position of detriment, with society thriving off of their sacrifices. The miners of the fuel meet demand by sacrificing aspects of their societal standings in order become the energy that drives society as a whole forward; the examination of the English coal miners in the working class between the 1920-1940s, as well as the modern day equivalent of miners in developing countries, reveals that as technology heightens demand for fuel, the working classes inevitably suffer, and their sacrifices lead to abysmal occupational, economic, and social conditions that propel them further away from the rest of society.

The advance of technology spurred a serious dependence on coal during the 1920s, and English coal miners were forced to work harder to provide for society; the increasing demands for coal forced the coal miners to suffer losses while other working classes gained economic success. The demand for coal sparked a chain reaction that first led to a population boom in mining districts. Between the 1920s and 40s, England was experiencing a profound economic shift. As Eric Hopkins, a research historian who produced *The Rise and Decline of the English*

Working Classes 1918-1990: A Social History, explains, the inter-war English economy was shifting from an agricultural society to a manufacturing one, and it was not achieved “without great social strains (Hopkins, 1). These strains fell on the coal miners as England needed a fuel to maintain itself. As Orwell eloquently explained, “our civilization is founded on coal,” and everything is “directly or indirectly dependent upon coal” (Orwell, 21); abhorrent conditions in the coal mining industry directly stemmed from a giant increase in consumption in the English economy. Productivity following the war had increased over four times faster than prior to the war, and as a result industrial production rose 62 percent through the inter-war period (Hopkins, 15). The result? Demand for coal skyrocketed. As technology progressed, the economic demand for fuel reached all time heights, and this forced the coal miners who supplied these resources to sacrifice more. Coal miners had to allow society to advance technologically, and the quickest way to address high coal demands was with their number of children. A comprehensive study composed by Dov Friedlander, who furiously examined demographic and socioeconomic within English coal mining populations in the 1920s, reveals that coal-mining districts developed high population growths due to early marriage, high marital fertility, and high birth rates (Friedlander, 40). This demographic change arose purely from the need to address coal demands, and even with high death and child mortality rates, population growth was “substantial” in these regions (Friedlander, 40). But this population rise was still not enough to meet demand, and in accordance with the insufficient amount of workers, immigration to these coal mining districts rose significantly; there is “ample evidence” that coal-mining districts received “substantial immigration” during the early 1900s (Friedlander, 43). Even with a considerably higher population density from high fertility and immigration, these districts still struggled to meet

demand quotas; this led to the next step in the progression of technological advancement and demand for fuel: the sacrifice of the lowest classes through their working conditions.

The coal miners in the twentieth century had to work harder and longer. As demand went up through technological advancements, worker productivity had to increase as well, and this caused working conditions to steadily decline; three aspects of coal mining suddenly garnered wretched conditions: commuting, mining, and worker safety. This is where Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* becomes crucial to understanding the struggle of the coal miner; Hopkins greatly respected Orwell, saying that he was "an honest reporter, and did not fabricate evidence" (Hopkins, 34). Orwell confirmed that the population increase failed to address demand, and the miners were forced to mine more coal, even though their total working-hours remained constant. The average amount of coal mined per worker increased substantially; in 1914 miners produced around 253 tons of coal, yet in 1934, only two decades later, each miner was producing 280 tons (Orwell, 43). But this average is not even fully representative, as the more accurate amount miners produced was "well over a thousand tons each" (Orwell, 43). This 400% increase in production in only a few years' time is directly related to the high demands for coal, and this heightened production led to dreadful conditions that were only comparable to torture. England's economy had already forced coal miners to undergo major population growth, and now the significant increase in production created attitudes where the the chief objective was meeting demand. This is when conditions turned to the worst. Mines had extreme heat, darkness, noise, foul air, and worst of all, "unbearably cramped space" (Orwell, 21). The increased productivity changed coal mining in three distinct spheres; the commute and 'time off' the job increased, the extremely strenuous work involved in mining worsened, and the safety protocols and initiatives disappeared. Heightened productivity meant an increase in working time, and miners therefore

increased their navigating times at the expense of their leisure. When miners arrived at the mine, they first had to navigate to their respective seam of coal. Miners covered “immense horizontal distances,” and some miners had to walk an upwards of five miles; this distance is not easily translatable, as there was no area in the mine shafts where the miners could stand upright, and the process must be repeated when the miners leave from a seven-hour shift (Orwell, 25).

Ultimately miners only had about four hours a day that were attributed to relaxation and leisure, not including commuting to the mine, eating, and bathing; not only did coal miners have significantly less leisure time than other working classes, but they lost more leisure hours as productivity went up (Orwell, 39). Along with their reduced leisure time, miners were forced to extract coal at faster rates, and had to suffer abysmal conditions; miners gathered coal fully immersed in a “fog of coal dust” that covered the whole cavern; every five yards “half-naked kneeling men” drove their shovels into coal heaps and flung it swiftly over their shoulder (Orwell, 22). During this phase, miners can be moving anywhere from seven and twelve cubic yards of coal, which translates to almost two tons an hour (Orwell, 32). In addition to the physically demanding work, the miners were covered “from head to foot” in coal dust, and had to endure “suffocating” heat (Orwell, 23). This arduous work continued for over seven hours without a break, and displays how demanding the mining industry was. Even with this level of production, mines experienced an urgency that led to many injuries. England demanded greater output, and thus workers took a backseat to priorities. Safety in the mines was rather miniscule. Casualties were often taken for granted because the rate of accidents in the mines were so high, (Orwell, 44). Shockingly, most of those injured knew perfectly well that the place they had been working was not safe; miners had a “daily expectation of an accident” (Orwell, 45). The cage, or the elevator, was one frequent cause of injury; it would often hit speeds of 60 mph or higher in

its descent, and sometimes it did not slow down in time (Orwell, 24). There was also the common gas explosion, roof collapses, and most intriguing, issues with new machinery; the new machinery, and “speeding up” made mining much more dangerous (Orwell, 46). Newer technology and riskier procedures helped meet demand but at the cost of the worker; overall, the higher demands for coal pushed the safety of the miners further into the background. The progression of technology and the increase in productivity in the mines did not just yield more coal, they made the job more dangerous, more extensive, and more onerous than before. Orwell appropriately noted that these miners had a serious “toughness” to them; they performed “an almost superhuman job by the standards of an ordinary person” (Orwell, 22). Even with herculean efforts, the amplified productivity in the mines guaranteed that the miners could not fix the economic hurdles that would eventually consume them.

The sacrifices the miners made in order to match demand only led to serious economic disadvantages; low wages, the collapse of their unions, and the rise of vast unemployment along with a devastating housing crisis would only push the miners away from the rest of the working classes and into an abyss of suffering. The increased dependency on the coal miners led to their devastating economic downfall that started with the collapse of the union and ultimately cumulated in depressed wages. By 1920, the working classes had formed large unions, but as their real wages rose substantially to three times their pre-war level, the unions forced the coal miners out since they did not experience this wage increase (Hopkins, 20). During the national coal strike, miners demanded a 30 percent pay raise, a six-hour day and the nationalization of the mines; the coal miners gained nothing as their union, the Triple Alliance, did not join the strike (Hopkins, 43). The demand for coal had reduced miners’ wages so severely that union membership eroded. By 1925, the miners were further disadvantaged as England went back to

the gold standard, thus ensuring even more severe cuts in wages (Hopkins, 44). This produced the General Strike, which created a nationwide standstill between the government, the owners, and the miners, and ultimately the government had to declare a state of emergency (Hopkins, 46). Eventually, the miners suffered reduced wages on a district basis, and an eight-hour workday (Hopkins, 48). The coal miners no longer had any means to improve their wages, and this meant that as demand continued to climb, the miners were trapped in a severe economic recession. These low wages helped lead to two increasingly tragic circumstances in mining districts; unemployment and a serious housing shortage. Unemployment arose from a variety of reasons, the most substantial from injury and age, as young, healthy men were the only people who could effectively work in the mines; the extremely strenuous work could only be sustained for relatively short periods of time, and once miners were too old, younger, more efficient miners took their place (Orwell, 23). This forced-retirement led to enormous unemployment. Of all the working classes, mining industries suffered the most unemployment, and coal mining as a whole experienced a high of 33.9% (Hopkins, 29). This does not accurately represent how bad unemployment was. Orwell spends a whole chapter on the misinformative statistics released in England that failed to accurately show how many coal miners were unemployed, and Hopkins explains that in 1932 in Tow Law, 80 percent of the men were unemployed, and nearly 100 percent of the men in Shildon (Hopkins, 29). Even with this horrible situation, the English government did not really intervene effectively; most policies were directed at changing unemployment insurance programs rather than completely overhauling it (Hopkins, 30). It was economically beneficial for England as a whole if the coal miners' wages and unemployment figures remained the same. England needed the best, most-able workers in the mines producing the coal needed for the economy, and they could not afford to have policies that increased wages

or kept unfit coal miners in the mines; England thus created the Means Test to strategically aid miners through calculated government dole even though it would cause “enormous resentment” throughout the mining districts because of its prying nature, forcing fathers to become reliant on contributions from working children (Hopkins, 32). While the Means Test was not correctly implemented, the dole was essential for families in these areas; in South Wales alone, one-third of single men, and half of married men, were economically better off on the dole than in their last job (Hopkins, 35). This speaks to the financial hardships that permeated throughout England, and how bad coal mining as an industry had become. Miners were entrenched in poverty, and the demand for coal had devastated miners to the extent where they were better off living on the dole rather than work eight hours in the mines where long commutes, deplorable conditions, and injuries were a constant reality. This is crucial for understanding because while it was dreadful to live at this level of income, the housing shortage essentially compounded the effects of unemployment and exacerbated them. One of the main reasons for the housing crisis was overcrowding, and the main reason for overcrowding was the extremely high birth and immigration rates touched upon prior. Interestingly, the original solution to higher demands for coal – a bigger population – eventually led to further repression of the coal miners. Because of the serious population growth beginning in the beginning of the 1920s, along with the low wages and the unemployment epidemic, the housing industry more than collapsed in these regions; urban slums were “in a frightful condition,” and even with government intervention, the “problem of the slums was far from being solved by 1939” (Hopkins, 22-23). The housing crisis, just like unemployment, faced the same issue where government intervention achieved virtually nothing. Again the government helped the wrong sectors because of economic incentives; therefore, the housing crisis was neglected, and the housing shortage rose to 600,000 by 1918

(Hopkins, 10). One town, Barnsley, spent nearly 150,000 pounds on a new town hall, even though there was a need for at least 2,000 working class homes (Orwell, 66). As unemployment grew, most families tried to become tenants and move into rented homes. These homes were rather terrible themselves, but they nonetheless were a shelter that was essential during winter months. Robert James, whose research examines the social changes within the English working classes during the inter-war period, noted that the housing crisis led to increased popularity among unemployed coal miners in local public buildings because of the pursuit of heat during the winter (James, 16). Economic devastation induced by the high demand of coal ravaged coal mining districts; the unemployment and housing shortages eroded morality within communities, and as a result, suicides rapidly increased. In 1932, two unemployed men committed suicide for every day in the year; it was so prevalent that from 1921-32, suicides among men under twenty-five years of age rose by 60 percent (Hopkins, 36). Leisure time was one of the chief issues among unemployed miners; employed miners at least had a sense of purpose and could take their minds off of their poor economic conditions. As an unemployed miner, cheap luxuries ultimately made life “more bearable” (Hopkins, 37) as they provided necessary a distraction from the harsh realities produced by coal demands; luxuries transformed the cultural norms of the miners as the majority of them became unemployed and faced more leisure time.

As coal demands imposed desolate working and economic conditions, coal miners’ social life radically shifted as a search for a coping mechanism transformed their culture. Instead of trying to ameliorate their situation as conditions got worse, the coal miners distracted themselves from their horrible plight; this further damaged their economic standing and pushed themselves away from the rest of society. While a miner had under four hours a day for leisure, an unemployed miner had all day. Luxuries became the obsession of the coal miners, and over time

the luxuries became more affordable, further increasing their popularity (Orwell, 89). These luxuries, according to James, were a “form of escapism” that provided coal miners a drug to help working-class consumers forget their troubles (James, 204). The main two forms of popular leisure were cinemas and literature, and they effectively distracted the miners from the enormous recession. These luxuries induced financial sacrifices, but there was such a large number of underpaid and underfed people in the inter-war period that the market adjusted itself, and soon luxuries were cheaper than necessities (Orwell, 89). In Wigan, Orwell found that a favorite refuge was the “fantastically cheap” pictures (Orwell, 80). A survey from 1934 reveals that 43 percent of cinema admissions cost no more than 6d, and 37 percent cost no more than 10d (James, 14). Cinemas advertised that you could “keep warm, be entertained, and forget the bleak world outside,” and even if miners did not have any currency available, alternate forms of payment were entirely acceptable; one child even used “two empty, clean two-pound jam jars” (James, 16). These two factors alone were more than enough to get miners to come to the cinema. Coal miners valued the warmth, comfort, and low cost of the cinema over the film itself, and now had a cheap way to distract themselves from their lives; as marketers realized the poorest classes were coming to their cinemas, they started to change the lineup. Once cheap entertaining films appeared, cinemas’ popularity exponentially soared; as James succinctly stated, “cinema-going was by far the most popular leisure activity in the 1930s” (James, 13). The vast evidence supporting cinema popularity helps explain why this phenomenon ultimately was directly influenced by the demand for coal; as “cinema attendances reached extraordinary levels,” it became abundantly clear that the coal miners were the majority of these viewers (Hopkins, 55). The principle function of going to the cinema or reading a book was the “ability to escape” (James, 204). Coal miners revered cinemas as a perfect distraction from the horrid

conditions they faced each day, and soon libraries also emerged as a prominent luxury, for the exact same reasons. Literature was still a dominant leisure activity at the time, and promoters thus regularly advertised films' authors (James, 26). This connection to films helped give rise to a significant increase in the publication of books aimed specifically at the bereft coal miners; novels written by popular authors became more readily available for the working-class readers (James, 27). With this rise in reading came the rise of libraries, and during the inter-war period, the number of people using the public library grew "year on year" and even more surprising, the number of issued books increased dramatically from 54.3 million in 1911 to a colossal 247.3 million by 1939 (James, 29). James discusses that in accordance with cinemas, the main reason for the growth in library usage was its role as "a social center" (James, 33). The most interesting aspect of James' research analyzes the different genres of films and literature mining districts preferred. Portsmouth's residents chose not to watch comedy films, which often depicted society as chaotic and combative; comedies offered no resolution, comfort, or reassurance for Portsmouth's residents, whereas highly popular romance novels and movies depicted figures overcoming economic and social issues contemporary with the miners (James, 204). Overall, the cultural changes coming about during the 1930s directly originated from the economic conditions generated by the huge demand of coal. Taking "part in these cultural activities thus acted as a coping mechanism; they provided an emotional release" from the slums (James, 204). England's reliance on coal created exorbitant demands that fell on the coal miners. As shown, this demand forced a population boom, degradation of labor conditions, and economic ruination; these factors spurred devastating unemployment and housing crises and ultimately forced the miners to abandon hope of fixing their condition. They instead focused on luxuries as a means of escape. World War II would provide a true escape, as oil would allow coal miners to flee from

hell and charge into combat, but it was too late; miners had already lost greatly. The coal miners met coal demands through sheer suffering and sacrifice – and this let England function.

As technology progressed following the early 20th century, a large shift in fuel emerged; the 21st century depends on a different fuel – mined minerals that power our computer technologies. The demand for minerals utilized in our computer electronics has grown tremendously and is now at a point where miners in developing countries are suffering worse working conditions than the coal miners had in England; the volatile and corrupt government infrastructures in the developing countries leads to a chaotic market where economic mobility is almost entirely impossible for miners. The world today is in desperate supply of materials that power all computers and electronic devices: the minerals that compose circuit boards and computer chips (Heath). Just like in inter-war England, the miners extracting this fuel for society today are suffering similar occupational, economic, and social hardships that plagued the coal miners; today's age brings new challenges though, as modern day miners must suffer extreme turmoil within their respective country's political system. Abiodun Alao, the author of *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment*, is one of the first researchers to examine the effect of globalization and conflict resources in developing countries; globalization has liberalized international trade through the increased activities of multinational corporations (Alao, 9). The nature of international trade is highly skewed against developing countries, and even with persistent movements for more equitable management, the situation has not improved; no place experiences more oppression than Africa (Alao, 281). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) vividly illustrates the plight of modern-day miners in a developing country; due to high demand for conflict resources, along with weak governments, working conditions erode instantly as more and more parties exploit miners in an effort to garner more wealth. The conflict

in the DRC has been precipitous; the efforts by local and international groups to control its large amount of resources have led to “incessant instability” (Alao, 115). Nick Heath, a respected journalist, noted that mining conflicts in the DRC have killed more than 5.4 million people since 1998, and the money fueling this conflict “flowed from the likes of you, me, and just about anyone else who bought a PC, phone, or electronic gadget in recent memory” (Heath). Due to this battle for control of the mines, the already wretched conditions turned worse. Heath extensively covered first hand reports of these conditions by interviewing Axel Mutia Mburano; Mburano describes an incredibly wretched account of suffering in the mines of the Walikale region of the DRC, and noted that as time went on, suffering worsened (Heath). Accounts of the mining conditions were reminiscent of the English coal miners’ conditions, with similar commutes, physical labor, and working hours – except these were usually more severe; mines were quickly constructed due to heavy demand, and because of the primitive setup of the mines, adults and children had to dig the minerals with primeval tools, sometimes their hands, without proper training (Heath). These mines usually were isolated and carried similar commuting times that the coal miners faced; one mine was in a barren area 50-km away from the nearest distribution centers, so minerals had to be carried on men’s, women’s and even children’s’ backs (Heath). These mines were already horrible, but soon conditions worsened with political instability. In 2008, an armed militia took over Mburano’s mine, and soon the conditions were no better than “slavery;” once the militia took over, people began to work 24 shifts, one team working days and one doing nights (Heath). Conditions became so abysmal that the mines became death traps as miners died from fatigue, flooding, and cave-ins; accidents were “a regular occurrence” (Heath). These tragedies arose because instability had demolished any rules created by the previous employer. The militia consequently viewed themselves as “outside the law,” and

therefore, theft and rape were rampant (Heath). Without question, these conditions are considerably worse than what the coal miners had to endure; the sheer perseverance and fortitude of these modern miners are incredible. That being said, with high demand still prevalent, these conditions have worsened and developed a network of poverty that encompasses the mines in the developing world.

In accordance with what English coal miners endured, serious demand for conflict resources has economically devastated the miners in Africa; with the lucrative mining business, corrupt governments have taken hold of the majority of profits, and in doing so have buried the miners further in poverty. Just like in England, rising demand forced workers to suffer despicable conditions, and these conditions compounded into economic misfortune, but England's government was stable and relatively pure, whereas today's governments in Africa are alarmingly corrupt and unstable. Davide Fiaschi, a researcher who has explored the economics of social conflict and poverty in relation to natural resources, states that the developing economies of these countries experience "stagnation" due to the social conflict from the abundance of natural resources; the presence of weak institutions, depletion of natural resources, and high population growth have weakened economies substantially (Fiaschi, 41). The high population growth of England's coal mining districts have been virtually replicated in today's developing countries, as demand has forced increased productivity once again. Thomas Akabzaa's research has also confirmed that similar to mining districts in England, poverty in Africa is "more endemic in communities directly impacted by mining activities," and spatial analysis reveals that towns proximate to mining communities are poorer as a result; the farther away a town lies from a mine, the less it is in poverty (Akabzaa, 55). Poverty plagues mining communities just like it did in England, but the instability and corruptness of governments in Africa lead to further

economic fallout. Empirical evidence shows that these sub-Saharan, mineral-rich countries have “the highest probability of civil war” in all developing nations (Fiaschi, 43). This instability has hindered widespread economic progress, and with conflict resources providing most of the income for these countries, governments have steadily become corrupted; unstable governments cannot negotiate with these large corporations that have very high demands for productivity, and therefore, unfavorable policies and agreements arise. When this happens, governments are forced to use shady tactics to find alternate revenue streams; ultimately this creates a corrupt government in a nation that is already economically bereft. This is a serious difference from the case of the English coal miners. Akabzaa, who published a book on the effects of mining in Ghana, explains that miners all across Africa suffer a great deal from corrupt governments that retain profits (Akabzaa, 58). The Ghanaian government utilizes royalties to take about 30 percent of profits that miners make from selling their minerals (Akabzaa, 47). Policies created to aid Ghanaian miners backfired, as royalties were originally intended to be a social welfare for miners; over time the government began to keep 80 percent of royalty revenues and only gave out 20 percent to the Mineral Development Fund (Akabzaa, 56). This policy directly withholds profits from the miners, and pushes them farther into poverty. As more information emerges from developing nations regarding the slave-like mining conditions and the overall issues with poverty and governmental corruption, it becomes abundantly clear that there is no equal comparison to the coal miners of the 1920s; the array of physical, economic, and social hardships expand beyond the horrendous conditions coal miners faced, and for this reason, demand for our modern fuel has required colossal suffering.

So what has this research ultimately revealed? It should be rather clear that as technology has progressed over time, there always has been an immense demand for the fuel that allows

society to function with its technology. There are cases like the inter-war period where coal demands could not be easily supplied, and this created the humungous strain that would consume the coal miners and lead to their occupational, economic, and social repression. Fast-forward to today's global economy and the significant disparity between demand and supply in the mineral market has produced virtually identical results. Corporations had to look across the globe for minerals, and unfortunately for the developing nations in Africa, they are the answer; African miners thus share a similar fate as the English coal miners. Globalism has actually worsened the miners' condition over time, as newer countries, which are not nearly as stable as inter-war England, teeter with pressure from powerful global corporations, corrupt governments, violent local militias, and overall uncertain economic futures. These forces appear in virtually every developing country that mines these materials, and thus their struggle is far worse than the English coal miners of the 1920s. Fortunately, there is hope. Corporations, governments, and consumers are finally addressing the problem massive demand yields; after years of exploitation, the DRC is being rebuilt by a more stable government, and many tech companies such as Apple have created robust recycling initiatives to reuse minerals instead of mining more (Heath). Current technologies may have oppressed the modern miner, but the advancement of social-benefit corporations have helped revolutionize society's outlook on business. Corporations now utilize triple bottom line initiatives to actively aid the lowest classes affected through their supply chains; this business model will help vanquish the exploitation of the lowest working classes in time. Business social initiatives also spurn government action, and this ensures some advancement for the lowest classes from an occupational, economic, and social standpoint; demand for fuel will increase, but there will now be initiatives set to help keep the miners with the rest of society.

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