Samantha Broad

"Explain how your work with the data sets illuminates the debate about living standards in Britain from c1900 to c1955"

Wages and jobs are very much in the public eye at the current time. My lesson sequence focuses on weekly earnings as a way of making comparisons between the relative merits of five of the biggest employers in the first half of the 20th century; coal mining, shipbuilding, the textile industry, construction and farming. Using the 1904 Board of Trade survey and the 1953-4 Household Expenditure Enquiry as a research tool for school age students provides some interesting results, especially when compared to the events of the period they cover. However, there are a number of issues involved: the decision to focus on wages as a means of comparison does not take into account the relative cost of living and the definition of what constituted poverty varies immensely. The inclusion of agricultural workers in a study primarily about industrial occupations has also caused issues. This work on living standard appears very applicable in the current climate and it is hoped that by studying issues faced by people in the last century, students will gain an insight into the difficult decisions that will need to be made today.

The first half of the twentieth century clearly was a period of growing affluence although the division between the rich and the poor has become wider. I have chosen to focus on the traditional manufacturing industry, which was the biggest employer in this period rather than the burgeoning tertiary sector as I want students to think about the impact of deindustrialisation has had on their local communities. If students come from an area which was once heavily dependent on jobs in the textile industry then they can have some idea of how the shift to service industries will have had.[1] Many towns across the UK have been affected by deindustrialisation and it is an interesting exercise to get students to compare the impact of national events, such as the Depression, with trends,

[1] E Hobsbawm *Age of Extremes 1914-1991* (Abacus, 1995) p572

(the global export of manufacturing, the decrease in household size) have had the standard of living.

Students will need an understanding of how poverty is defined. There are two ways of thinking about this. Absolute poverty may be the way students would initially choose to demarcate which groups on society were living in poverty. The absence of enough to food to eat, clothes to wear and a home to live in. Students will then need to ask themselves that if everyone is this country had those things, would poverty have been eradicated? The answer to this is the measurement of relative poverty. If the same measure of poverty is used over time, then the numbers in relative poverty should stay proportionately the same, as by definition, these are the people who don't have what the rest of their society does have. In this way, relative poverty will vary from period to period and from country to country (a broadband connection may be considered to be an essential part of living today, but not so much in the 1950s)

My work with the datasets has focused primarily on wage levels. This level of simplification was necessary as it was important to find a hook that students could relate to. However, this is such a small proportion of the overall picture of living standards. Wages provide an illumination of the debate when used in conjunction with relative prices. For example, the relatively small fall in wages in the 1930s needs to be offset against the much larger drop in prices[2] to gain an accurate picture of living standards during the Depression, but students will be led to believe that the drop of wages was more significant within the parameters of the investigation.

In order to avoid this, students could have been asked to make a comparison of how many people were living in relative poverty within each occupation. For example, Bowley defined the bottom 10% of the society as earning under £1 a week[3] just before the First World War. According to the 1904 Survey, taking as an example of builders and

[2] I Gazeley *Poverty in Britain 1900-1965,* (Palgrave, 2003) p67
[3] Ibid p17

miners, then roughly 30% of labourers were earning below £1 a week and no coal miners were. This certainly produces a comparable set of figures though the percentages can be heavily skewed by one labourer, for example, no.406 who was often ill and therefore did not work full time over the period the survey was taken. These figures would produce a proportion of each occupation whose earnings would place them in the bottom 10% of society but is heavily dependent on that particular definition of poverty. Just as being in the bottom 10% of earners would be undesirable, so would being in the bottom 15%. Many of those labourers in the 1904 dataset whose earnings fell below £1 week, fell short by only 3 or 4d. This is a narrow definition of poverty. It would have also been worthwhile looking at other earners in households; the proportion of women working in each household allocated to each job would indicate the whether the level of wages earnt from the male salary was deemed sufficient. Of course, this discriminates against single adult households and whether the women wanted to work. Aside from this, the 1904 does not include a category for female earnings and so a cross comparison would not be possible.

In addition to this, students will need to have some understanding of how much purchasing power the wages in the past actually had; real vs actual wages. I think the best way to explain this is to give an empirical (or anecdotal) example. From my own family, my father recalled a family holiday for two adults and two children in 1954 to the Isle of Wight, staying full board for one week. My father was astonished to see my grandfather write a cheque for the holiday for around £50. The 1953 survey can be used to establish that this is way above the weekly salary of between £9-£10; this shows how holidays were a relatively expensive outgoing and would explain why travel had not yet reached the levels of popularity it has today. It would not take a great deal of research to find out the cost of a similar holiday today and establish the purchasing power of the real wage.

There are, of course, many definitions of poverty that could be used here in place of Bowley's 10%. Charles Booth's definitions could have been applied equally as well. Booth defined as anyone living in Class C or D (on his A-H scale) as poor, though not necessarily in poverty[4]. Look at Booth's figures, this would define anyone with an income of less than 18s (218d) a week as being in poverty[5]. According to the 1904 Survey, this would put labourers firmly at the least well paid end of the scale. This could have been a useful alternate measure but as Booth acknowledges in his group descriptors, people in Class C would have been earning 18s or less on "intermittent earnings" which the 1904 Survey does not take into account.

No only do contemporary authors from the same period disagree on their definitions of poverty but definitions of poverty across the 50 year span of the surveys have also changed. The introduction of new consumer goods as evidenced in the 1953-4 Enquiry shows the rise of items, once considered a luxury (cars, televisions and electrical appliances) and which would become necessities. To be able to make any kind of meaningful comparison across the eras, I have therefore avoided using any set definition of poverty as a way of gauging the comparative affluence of each worker and relied on a simple ranking system.

The lessons I have written could be seen as the start of a more complete investigation into the relative standards of living amongst the five occupations I have chosen to focus on. What was particularly interesting was being able to read the comments added by the respondents to the 1904 Board of Trade survey, as these are a window into people's own perceptions of their standard of living. It is noticeable that some of the more heartbreaking comments recorded on the 1904 survey were not made by any of the people in the five chosen occupations (although one miner, no.890, did remark his family were "half starved" and his earnings 300d per week puts his income well above the bottom 10% Bowley defined poverty at). Possibly the lack of comment could

[4] M Bulmer & K Bales *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, p189*
[5] C Booth *Life and Labour of the People in London,* http://booth.lse.ac.uk/static/a/4.html#i

indicate that the respondents saw their own standard of living as acceptable. However, as Bowley points out, the improvement in living standards is a long term trend and rarely recognised by those experiencing it at the time[6]. Although I chose to look at the occupations that were most common, perhaps a future study or set of lessons could be produced to include some of the worse paid occupations or even the unemployed listed in those particular professions.

This investigation has, for the sake of simplicity, taken the assumption that household are static which is, of course, not the case. Just as there were variations between the standard of living in the urban and rural poor, the fortunes of families would vary over the time period being focused on. Rowntree indicated in his study of poverty in urban areas in 1902 that the rise and fall of affluence could be mapped out; for example, the period before a couple had their first child was a time of relative wealth, in comparison to when the same couple were supporting infants (who were too young to work), which was the time of greatest financial struggle.[7]

I have included agricultural workers which is an unfair comparison as farming is not technically an industrial occupation. However, agriculture was susceptible to the same issues caused by mechanisation and globalisation as the other occupations; falling wages due to the cost of production going down and the import of cheaper products from abroad.[8] Furthermore, just as regional differences would affect a textile worker in the midlands or in the North West, so there would be a large gulf in the cost of living between the urban and rural worker. The costs of living in rural areas vary hugely from place to place, let alone when compared with the cost of living in larger towns and cities. This can be easily illustrated by the datasets. The average weekly rent in London & the suburbs in 1904 was 85d. In Scotland it was 47.5d. Another factor which needs to

[6] AL Bowley *Wages and Incomes since 1860* pX
[7] B.S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life,* (London, 1902), p137
[8] E Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes 1914-1991,*(Abacus, 1995) p572

be taken account of is that some of the trends are longer term than the period being covered by the datasets. The textile industry was already in decline by the First World War[9] and continued to lose out throughout the years after the First World War due to the shrinking export market,[10] so it is hardly surprising that the textile workers' wages come out as relatively low. Students will be given the impression that national events are the sole catalyst for the rise and fall of wages when issues such as lack of investment in heavy industry were longer term reasons for declining wage levels.

Britain was left in the 1950s with an unsustainable legacy of low unemployment created by Government intervention in the form of subsidies[11] and high demand caused by the Second World War. Maintaining the era of "you've never had it so good" was the challenge that successive governments were unable to meet and are still, in a fashion trying to today. The current financial crisis, now estimated to continue until at least 2018, has seen a drop in living standards after the pre crisis figures which suggested that the rise in living standards had come to an end long before the market crash of 2007[12]. The rising demand in pensions and the changing demands of the job market have left policy makers with the same set of decisions they were faced with in the first half of the 20th century: to increase Government intervention like in the post war period, or to leave the solution to free market forces.

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[9] N McCord, *British History 1865-1906,* (Oxford, 1991), p437

[10] M Pugh, *We Danced All Night; a social history between the wars*, (Vintage, 2009), p78

[11] *Cabinet Conclusion 2 Shipping Industry* 2nd December 1965, National Archives, p7

[12] *Gaining from Growth; The Final Report of the Commission on Living Standards*, Resolution Foundation, 30 October 2012, p9

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