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**SEASONAL TRADES**

*LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS*

**SOCIAL INVESTIGATION AND  
RESEARCH**

**SEMINAR BY MR. SIDNEY WEBB, ASSISTED  
BY MR. ARNOLD FREEMAN**

*SYLLABUS*

The object of this Seminar will be to enable those who take part to discover for themselves how to study a given subject; to bring out the points of interest in apparently unpromising material; to accustom the students to use the different methods of investigation and the principal sources of information, and make them realise, by personal experiment and mutual criticism, both how such studies are apt to fall short of accuracy and completeness, and in what manner these defects may be remedied.

The subject chosen for study—selected partly because of the interesting problems it affords in connection with Unemployment, the Standard of Life, the maintenance of the family group, the enforcement of a National Minimum, and the economic competition among different industries for the nation's capital, brains, and labour—is "Seasonal Trades in the United Kingdom." After an introductory lecture, in which these trades will be briefly described, the sources of information and the methods of study indicated, and some of the points for investigation discussed, each student will be expected to undertake one trade or part of a trade for individual study. At the first or second meeting the various trades or parts of trades will be allotted among the students, according to individual preference and opportunities. Each student will then set to work to prepare, during the ensuing three months, with such suggestions and advice as can be given, as accurate and complete a survey of the trade as time and opportunities may permit. The object will be, not at first to write a finished monograph, but to make a preliminary sketch of such a monograph, with detailed studies of portions of the field for subsequent incorporation. For this purpose as much individual guidance and tuition will be afforded as may be practicable. As far as possible, each student will be given an opportunity during 1911 to read the paper, in whole or in part, at a meeting of the Seminar, when suggestions will be made for its improvement and completion. Errors and omissions will be pointed out, additional sources of information will be suggested, and further points for investigation will be indicated. Each student will be expected to continue to work on the trade allotted, gradually elaborating the sketch into a finished monograph, and taking advantage of such opportunities for consultation and discussion, and for personal investigation and research, as can be afforded.

Whatever proves to be of value in the work done may eventually be published, in one form or another, under the names of the respective authors.

Admission to the Seminar will be exclusively by permission of Mr. Sidney Webb. The number will be limited, and confined to those prepared to study some particular trade in the manner indicated. Individual consultations and tuition, so far as this is possible, will be arranged to suit mutual convenience; and the dates and hours of meeting of the Seminar will be fixed from time to time as may be found generally convenient, but such meetings will probably be at 5 or 5.30 p.m. Application for admission should be made, if possible, before 15th September. Late applications will be considered subject to there being still places vacant.

Open to students paying either the Composition Fee or the Research Fee.

# **SEASONAL TRADES**

**BY VARIOUS WRITERS**

**WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
SIDNEY WEBB**

**EDITED BY SIDNEY WEBB, LL.B.  
AND ARNOLD FREEMAN, M.A.**

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## PREFACE

THE "Seasonal Trades," in which several millions of our fellow citizens find their livelihood periodically interrupted from no fault of their own, have, in the last decade, often been referred to. But they seem never to have been made the subject of detailed study. The nineteenth century economists, as appears from the first of the following chapters, scarcely deigned to notice the seasonal tides upon the industrial ocean; and practically no attempt seems to have been made to ascertain, by specific investigation of facts, how far the current generalisations as to rates of wages and conditions of employment were borne out by the actual phenomena. The bibliographical information in the present volume indicates how scanty is our stock of knowledge on the subject. From philanthropic motives, during the past two decades, special attention has been paid to dock and wharf labour, and to the building trades; but the problem of their "seasonality" has not been specifically studied in connection with that of other industries.

The present volume is the outcome of a Seminar at the London School of Economics and Political Science during the session 1910, in which Mr. Arnold Freeman, to whom the putting together of the book is almost wholly due, acted as my assistant. Prepared amid examination and other pressure, in competition with other studies, and necessarily under stress of time, these chapters of "students' work" inevitably fall short of the highest standards of scientific investigation or economic scholarship. But they represent no small amount of patient, original, and independent research, and personal inquiries into the various trades; they add something to our available stock of knowledge; and,

taken together, they serve to bring home to us some of the realities of economic pressure that lie beneath and behind all our abstractions about the capacity of "the labour market" for an indefinite "absorption" of the temporarily unemployed!

We may realise from the variety of industries dealt with in this volume—a selection which is but a sample of many others—that practically all trades are "seasonal" to a greater or less extent. Sometimes the recurrent seasonal slackness affects practically all those engaged in the industry; sometimes the weight falls upon particular classes of operatives only, but upon the whole of those classes; and sometimes all the burden has to be borne by a fringe of "casual hands." A change from one to another of these varieties of "under-employment" has sometimes been counted as progress! Any statistical or quantitative estimate of the amount by which the volume of employment is greater at one time than another, it is almost impossible to obtain, though Mr. Frank Popplewell has managed to secure valuable information on this point with regard to Gas manufacture, and Mr. A. D. Webb affords some indication with regard to the building trades. Still more difficult is it to trace exactly on what classes, in what places, and upon which individual workers the burden of a recurrent cessation of the means of livelihood actually falls, and how it affects the life of the household. But every student of the problems of the poor, and every philanthropic worker, knows what difficulties and dangers, how many tragic family breakdowns and degradations of the Standard of Life, these recurrent periods of "slackness" are responsible for.

Is there any need for such purely "seasonal" fluctuations of employment at all? The question seems at first sight vain, for how can we get rid of the alternations of summer and winter, of seed-time and harvest, of light and darkness? It was, however, one of the valuable facts revealed by the late Royal Commission

on the Poor Laws, that, taking all the industries of the United Kingdom together, there is no such striking difference in the total volume of employment from one month to another as is commonly supposed. It is simply not true that we may take it for granted that business is brisk in the spring and dull in the winter. Miss Poyntz brings out in the present volume the fact that, although there is a slack season in nearly all trades, this occurs at different parts of the year. There is, as the Board of Trade, from accurate statistics of the past decade, is able positively to testify, no month in the year in which some great industry is not at its very slackest, and equally no month in the year in which some great industry is not at its very busiest. Thus, taking the actual facts of the last ten years, whilst January is the slackest month in iron-mining and the furnishing trades, it is actually the busiest at the docks of London and other ports (except those dealing with the Baltic), and one of the busiest for coal-mining; in February the plumbers have most unemployment, but the paper-making trade is at its briskest; in March and April the coopers are at their slackest, but the steel-smelters, the great industries of the textiles and multifarious furnishing trades are busy; May and June are the worst of all months for the great industry of coal-mining, as well as for the London dock-labourers, but they are the best of all months for the wide ramifications of the clothing trades, as well as for mill-sawyers; July sees the iron and steel and tin-plate works at their lowest ebb, but the railway service and all the occupations of the holiday resorts are near their busiest; in August and September the paper-makers, printers, book-binders, textile operatives, and tobacco-workers are more unemployed than at any other time, but (besides the railway and steamboat lines and all occupations of the holiday resorts) all forms of agriculture harvesting are at their height; the clothing trades are at their very slackest in October, but the iron and steel works are

then at their busiest; November, on an average, sees the best of all months for printing and bookbinding, tobacco and tin-plate, and for most of the metal trades; December is the worst of all months for carpenters and engineers, mill-sawyers, and coach-builders, leather-workers and brush-makers, but then it is the best of all months for coal-miners, the very extensive theatrical industry, the Post Office service and the producers of gas and electric light. If the Board of Trade had available statistical evidence as to other industries, there is every reason to believe that we should find the same "infinite variety" in their seasonal slackness.

Now, I have ventured to postulate as an economic hypothesis, to be tested by the facts whenever we can ascertain them, that *there is, in the United Kingdom of to-day, no seasonal slackness in the community as a whole*. Leaving aside for a moment the "cyclical" fluctuations of trade, about which we hear so much, and which make the aggregate volume of business differ from year to year; and ignoring the chronic "under-employment" of the casual labourer, of which Mr. W. H. Beveridge has discovered the cause, I suggest that—so far as mere "seasonal" changes are concerned—the volume of employment in the aggregate probably remains pretty constant throughout the year. Stating it definitely, I venture to say that if we could get accurate statistics of the total number of wage-earners actually in employment in the United Kingdom this week we should find it to be very nearly identical with the total number for any other week of the present year. This is almost certainly true with regard to the great mass of unskilled and only slightly specialised labour, which makes up more than half of the whole.

An economic explanation can be given for this hypothetical paradox. In a highly-evolved industrial community, with occupations of the most multifarious kinds, the "product" of industry comes to market uninterruptedly throughout the whole year. There is,

in such a community, no special month of harvest. Translated into practical life, we may say that nearly all of us get our incomes week by week, or quarter by quarter, fairly evenly, throughout the year; and we nearly all of us spend our incomes as we get them. It is true that we do not spend them each week in the same way. Sometimes most of us are buying clothes, and sometimes, most of us, holiday amusements; and this variation in demand causes the seasonal fluctuations in particular trades. But week by week we are all using or consuming much the same amount in the aggregate, giving, in the aggregate, the same number of orders, to the same total amount; and, therefore, indirectly setting to work, in the aggregate, the same amount of labour.

From this hypothesis there seems to flow the momentous conclusion that the seasonal alternations of overpressure and slackness to which so many workers are subjected, with such evil results, are due only to failures of adjustment. There is no more "inevitability" about them than about the rattling of a motor-car. They mean only that our statesmen have not yet given themselves the trouble to make the social adjustments, and to employ the various devices, by which these calamitous dislocations of the lives of so many hundreds of thousands of households can be prevented.

This is the sort of problem which is going to make Twentieth Century economics even more fascinating, and perhaps even more practically useful to Humanity, than Nineteenth Century chemistry or physics. However, it was not the business of my Seminar to discover any practical plan for preventing Seasonal Unemployment; though the brilliant paper on "The Waiter," by Mrs. Drake, affords some suggestive hints; and Mr. Carter's study of the gradual evolution of the great industry which supplies us with Bicycles may give us some more. What Miss Calver has to tell us about the Boot and Shoe industry; and Mlle. Bourat about the various branches of work in Skins and Furs, bring their



own contributions to the problem; whilst the accounts given by Miss Charlotte Saunders of the Millinery trade, and by Mrs. Drake of the Tailoring trade, remind us of the infinite complexities of the economic "philosophy of clothes."

By what steps can we proceed to such a "regularisation" of these seasonal trades, and such a "dovetailing" of their unspecialised and unskilled labour, as would prevent the recurrent fluctuations of employment to which they are now subject? This is "another story," which is perhaps out of place in such a volume as this. Those who are interested to pursue the subject will find in the lately published volume, "The Prevention of Destitution," by S. and B. Webb, an elaborate exposition of the policy by which, as it seems to the writers, the great bulk of involuntary unemployment and "under-employment" can be actually prevented.

SIDNEY WEBB.

June, 1911.

The members of the Seminar have asked me to express their thanks to Mr. B. M. Headicar, Librarian of the London School of Economics, for the valuable help he has given them in the preparation of these papers.

February, 1912.

ARNOLD FREEMAN.

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