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## **On the economy of machinery and manufactures**

**Babbage, Charles**

**London, 1832**

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich**

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Persistent Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-20109>

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## CHAP. XV.

## ON THE INFLUENCE OF DURABILITY ON PRICE.

(146.) HAVING now considered the circumstances that modify what may be called the momentary amount of price, we must next examine a principle which seems to have an effect on its permanent average. *The durability of any commodity influences its cost in a permanent manner.* We have already stated, that what may be called the *momentary price* of any commodity depends upon the proportion existing between the supply and demand, and also upon the cost of verification. The *average price*, during a long period, will depend upon the labour required for producing and bringing it to market, as well as upon the average supply and demand; but it will also be influenced by the *durability of the article manufactured.*

Many *things* in common use are substantially consumed in using: a phosphorus match, articles of food, and a cigar, are examples of this description. Some things after use become inapplicable to their former purposes, as paper which has been printed upon; but it is yet available for the cheesemonger or the trunk-maker. Some articles, as pens, are quickly worn out by use; and some are still valuable after a long-continued wear. There are others, few perhaps in number, which never wear out; the harder

precious stones, when well cut and polished, are of this latter class : the fashion of the gold or silver mounting in which they are set may vary with the taste of the age, and such ornaments are constantly exposed for sale as second-hand, but the gems themselves, when removed from their supports, are never so considered. A brilliant, which has successively graced the necks of a hundred beauties, or glittered for a century upon patrician brows, is weighed by the diamond merchant in the same scale with another which has just escaped from the wheel of the lapidary, and will be purchased or sold by him at the same price per carat. The great mass of commodities is intermediate in its character between these two extremes, and the periods of respective duration are very various. It is evident that the average price of those things which are consumed in the act of using them, can never be less than that of the labour of bringing them to market. They may for a short time be sold for less, but under such circumstances their production must soon cease altogether. On the other hand, if an article never wears out, the consequence will be, that its price may continue *permanently below* the cost of the labour expended in producing it; and the only consequence will be, that no further production will take place: its price will continue to be regulated by the relation of the supply to the demand; and should that at any after time rise, for a considerable period, above the cost of production, it will be again produced.

(147.) Articles become old from actual decay, or the wearing out of their parts; from improved modes of constructing them; or from changes in their form

and fashion, required by the varying taste of the age. In the two latter cases, their utility is but little diminished; and, being less sought after by the classes who have hitherto employed them, they are sold at a reduced price to a class of society rather below that of their former possessors. Many articles of furniture, such as well-made tables and chairs, are thus found in the rooms of those who would have been quite unable to have purchased them when new; and we find constantly, even in the houses of the more opulent, large looking-glasses which have passed successively through the hands of several possessors, changing only the fashion of their frames; and in some instances even this alteration is omitted, an additional coat of gilding saving them from the character of being second-hand. Thus a taste for luxuries is propagated downwards in society; and, after a short period, the numbers who have acquired new wants become sufficient to excite the ingenuity of the manufacturer to reduce the cost of supplying them, whilst he is himself benefited by the extended scale of demand.

There is a peculiarity in looking-glasses with reference to the principle just mentioned. The most frequent occasion of injury to them arises from accidental violence; and the peculiarity is, that, unlike most other articles, when broken they are still of some value. If a large mirror is accidentally cracked, it is immediately cut into two or more smaller ones, each of which may be perfect. If the degree of violence is so great as to break it into many fragments, these smaller pieces may be cut into squares for dressing-glasses; and if the silvering is injured, it can either be

re-silvered or used as plate-glass for glazing windows. The addition from our manufactories to the stock of plate-glass in the country is annually about two hundred and fifty thousand square feet. It would be very difficult to estimate the quantity annually destroyed or exported, but it is probably small; and the effect of these continual additions is seen in the diminished price and increased consumption of the article. Almost all the better order of shop fronts are now glazed with it. If it were quite indestructible, the price would continually diminish; and unless an increased demand arose from new uses, or from a greater number of customers, a single manufactory, unchecked by competition, would ultimately be compelled to shut up, driven out of the market by the permanence of its own productions.