
REVIEWS

The Slow Transformation

Patrick O'Brien and Roland Quinault (eds), The Industrial Revolution and British Society, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993

Reviewed by H. M. Boot

EACH of the eleven chapters in this collection is written by a former graduate student of Max Hartwell. Each surveys recent literature on social, economic and political aspects of Britain's industrial revolution. The book is intended as a textbook for later-year undergraduates; and although the level is well suited to its intended market, it also provides a useful source for non-specialist but interested readers wishing to keep up with recent research in this key area of economic and social history.

Hartwell's influence on his students appears to have been as strong as it was on industrial revolution studies generally. The Hartwell view that the industrial revolution marked a pronounced discontinuity in history was the dominant paradigm among economic historians in the 1960s and 1970s. By focusing attention explicitly on the changes taking place between 1750 and 1850, the writers of this volume all indicate their implicit support of the Hartwell view. It is a view that sits uneasily with interpretations now in vogue based on the macro growth accounting exercises of Nick Crafts and others that emphasise the slowness and unbroken trend of growth and change in 18th and 19th century Britain. Although the contributors to this volume are well aware of this changed interpretation, they are, for the most part, reluctant to give up Hartwell's interpretation easily. The result is an interesting tension in several essays as the contributors attempt to come to terms with two contradictory ways of interpreting the industrial revolution.

Patrick O'Brien's survey of modern conceptions of the industrial revolution goes furthest towards rejecting the recent emphasis on the slowness and unbroken flow of British growth experience in the 18th and 19th centuries. He rightly points out two difficulties with Crafts's interpretation: it is based on the reconstruction of well known but much flawed data; and it fails to accord either with the evidence of much detailed research on particular regions, industries and occupations, or with contemporary opinion that something astonishing was changing British society, qualitatively and quantitatively, into a strikingly different one from that of 100 years earlier. The result, he says, is the emergence of a distressingly wide gap in modern research between perceptions based on macro-accounts purporting to measure rates of change and growth, and an impressive body of traditional scholarship that at best leaves modern revisions representing little more than minor qualifications to the notion of the industrial revolution as a pronounced discontinuity.

While still subscribing to Hartwell's views, Gary Hawke and several other contributors are more accommodating towards the new interpretations. They regard the slowness of the change emphasised by recent research as a factor that helps to explain why Britain was able to pass through an otherwise highly traumatic period of economic and social change so successfully. Successful transformation was achieved, they argue, because the slowness of change provided society with time to construct and implement new compromises that permitted the conflicts generated by industrial and social change to work themselves out. The result was that, although British society was changed immeasurably by the experience, the state played almost no part in initiating economic change, and never more than a minor role in accommodating British society to the changes. Social dislocation was nevertheless remarkably constrained, and economic progress was never frustrated by the inability to find an acceptable distribution of its costs. It is this new interpretation that in recent years has encouraged social historians to begin moving away from their traditional emphasis on the trauma and conflict of the industrial revolution to an emphasis on forces that allowed society to accommodate and benefit from the growth and change taking place.

Given the importance of these revisions, it is appropriate that five of the chapters in the collection should focus on social aspects of the industrial revolution, while two others examine political and constitutional changes. A few examples must serve to illustrate the wide range of issues raised. In an almost obligatory chapter on women in the industrial revolution, Duncan Bythell shows how industrialisation did little to liberate the social and economic position of women until the demographic revolution of the 20th century unshackled them from the demands of frequent childbirth. At the same time, Thomas Laqueur argues, industrialisation helped to extend the sexual freedoms of the lower classes by lowering barriers to marital and extra-marital sexual activity, but raised upper-class anxieties with fears of a growth of licentiousness among the working class. Laqueur's thesis is stimulating but appears strained at times. It is a pity also that he fails to consider some obvious links between the changes he describes and their likely influence on child-bearing and possible delays to female emancipation.

Three chapters (on religion, parliamentary reform, and crime and punishment) consider different aspects of the way British society managed the growing potential for conflict generated by industrialisation. Alan Gilbert examines in detail Elie Halévy's famous hypothesis that the growth of Methodism inhibited working-class protest. Gilbert concludes that Methodism had the numbers to perform such a role and that a *prima facie* case exists for believing that the dearth of extremist radical leadership among the British working class can in part be attributed to Methodist influence. Roland Quinault concludes that demand for parliamentary reform before 1867 owed less to industrialisation and the growth of class consciousness than to appeals to ancient rights by established interests in London and rural England, and was hardly noticed in the industrial towns of the midlands and north. In consequence, constitutional reform not only lagged behind continental experience, but

when it did come its initial effect in Britain was to perpetuate the power of established interests rather than to enhance the emergent urban-industrial classes.

Another consequence of British industrialisation was a growing fear in British society that the concentration of people in towns and cities was creating a criminal class far greater in size than existing criminal codes could handle: a fear much enhanced by the coincidental violent revolution in France. The British response was to embark on a long period of reform of criminal law and punishment starting in the 1790s and lasting well into the 19th century. David Philips's excellent account shows how, by 1860, reform had transformed the machinery of criminal law, law-enforcement and punishment in Britain into their recognisable form in the elements of the modern state. At the same time, by increasing the number of offences and providing more effective policing, by encouraging a greater willingness among private citizens to prosecute offenders, and by extending the use of summary trial and secondary punishments, the reforms had the effect of greatly increasing the volume of criminal offences and the growth of a criminal class they were intended to curb.

Useful surveys of literature on the geographic margins of the industrial revolution (Eric Richards), on technological and organisational change (G. N. von Tunzelmann), and on social aspects of the industrial revolution (John Stevenson) complete the range of topics covered. The book ends with 'an appreciation' of Max Hartwell by Eric Jones.

The book contains some disappointments. Important topics such as agriculture, the performance of major manufacturing industries and the poor law do not get anything like the treatment they deserve, and, inevitably in any volume of essays by ten authors, some contributions are less satisfying than others. In general, however, the book provides a useful overview of modern scholarship on the industrial revolution, well suited to its aim of providing a text suitable for undergraduate study. Since there are few good alternative texts it is likely to be adopted for a wide range of British economic, social and general history courses.

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