

Industrial Revolution and the Boom of Middle Class

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Introduction

It is argued that it was the industrial Revolution's social and economic changes that brought about the middle class. This paper is intended to expand upon this argument and try to reach a conclusion.

There have been distinct periods of interpretation, each shaped by the contemporary conditions experienced by the historians who developed them. Late nineteenth-century British commentators saw the Industrial Revolution as a sharp technological break with the past, a break that was not only big but heavy with cataclysmic consequences for ordinary people.

In this paper it is argued that middle class was came into existence due to the industrial revolution.

Industrial Revolution and the Boom of the Middle Class

The new paradigm was, like the first, influenced by contemporary problems, this time those of the "Third World" and its "underdeveloped" countries.¹ Its proponents analyzed the Industrial Revolution as the first example of successful economic development; they focused on the long-run rise of

¹ Rose, Sonya O., *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Glass in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 8, 9, 13, 16.

the standard of living for the majority in developed economies. As the passage of time demonstrated the limited results of "development policy" for Third World countries and the late 1970s and early 1980s revealed the unanticipated fragility of western economies during that period's international economic restructuring, economic historians began to look with different eyes at the past. Important also in this regard was the accumulating evidence from comparative histories of industrialization in national states other than Britain. Today's themes are evolutionary change rather than revolution, uneven development, and limits to growth; economic and social historians challenge technological determinist arguments and again acknowledge losses as well as gains in the process.

If capitalist industrialization occurred gradually, if it involved demographic and socio-cultural as well as technological factors, if it meant regional or sectoral decline as well as progress, then a sociological approach, one that links changes in ordinary people's lives (and variation among groups) with those on the level of changing economic structures, can broaden our understanding of the process. Enter the social history of women; here, studies of the factors that contributed to slow change, capital accumulation, and class formation have been important.

Women's history, in its focus on the small scale context of large scale change, suggests mechanisms which mediated change, moderating the discontinuities involved. Like the late Victorian studies of the Industrial Revolution, it again emphasizes human costs as well as long-term benefits.

Basis of Middle Class Formation

The concept of a consumer society is integral to thinking about links among women, gender, and industrialization. Consumer society, like the rising bourgeoisie, had a long gestation. Joan Thirsk places its beginnings in early modern England; by the early seventeenth century, "project" had become a key word. Projects ("practical scheme[s] for exploiting material things; [a project] was capable of being realized through industry and ingenuity") were developed to make money, to give work to the poor, to trade with distant countries, or to substitute for imports. They ranged from new methods of iron founding, weaving worsted woolen fabrics, and growing woad, to making pins, paper, lace, or thread (Thirsk, 1978, p. 1).

"The goods which came on to the market in greater quantity than ever before as a result of projects promoted the growth of a consumer society," Thirsk declares. (n4)
Probate inventories make it possible to compare the contents

of houses in the late seventeenth century with those in 1550. There occurred over those two centuries a great increase in the quantity of household and personal belongings listed in the inventories; further, seed catalogs for gardening and farming reveal many varieties of fruits and vegetables available for cultivation and consumption. She attributes this to the growth of rural (non-guild-organized) manufacturing in the new projects, at first providing part-time work to members of agricultural households but later becoming the chief activity of more and more rural dwellers.

These workers, paid in cash by the merchants or agents who sold their products in distant markets elsewhere in Britain or overseas, were in turn buyers of the cloth, pins, knives, pots and pans, lace, and stockings that other rural workers were producing. Although wages were not high for part-time workers in rural manufacturing, the increased availability of waged work for several household members meant more household buying power, hence, greater demand for manufactured products. And the list of products noted here suggests that women were among the chief buyers (or at least

those who instigated the purchases) in this early consumer economy.²

Early modern households were not able to produce all the goods they needed for everyday life; a market economy long preceded the Industrial Revolution. Port of London records, which reported 80 percent of all imports into the country, demonstrate that the English rapidly adopted non-European products like tobacco, sugar, tea, coffee, and chocolate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; prices fell as imports increased.

However, this was not a simple increase in volume; changing imports reflected a shift in the composition of diets away from milk and cheese and toward caffeine drinks and sugar. Thus, by the middle of the eighteenth century, ordinary English consumers were likely to be less well-nourished even as they spent about the same or a greater proportion (50-60percent) of their income on food.

Shammas provides evidence as well about consumer "durables;" here, too, rather than a net increase, there was a shift in the types of more durable goods that consumers were buying. Thus, while more items made of cloth (bedding and clothing) were purchased, the proportion of those made

² Gaunt, David, et al., "The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Review Symposium," *Social History* 8 (1983): 139-168.

of brass and pewter and bed and table linen decreased. Consumers were also buying china cups and dishes, clay pipes, and so on. These purchases were closely related to the consumption of the imported tobacco and caffeine drinks that were becoming so popular.³

Who was doing the buying? Consumer demand was hierarchically structured, for many people (servants, dependent children, and wives) were not buyers themselves but beneficiaries of purchases by employers, masters, or husbands, or heirs of parents and kin who were leaving them consumer goods as a bequest. In short, by the early years of the Industrial Revolution, consumption of newly available imports was no simple indicator of increased well-being. (n5)

Turning now to more explicit examination of middle class formation and women in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, readers of early Victorian novels will recognize echoes in the following discussion of Mrs. Thornton, the severe, business-minded mother of the mill owner from the fictional industrial town of Milton (Manchester) in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (first published in 1854).

³ Canadine, David, "The Past and the Present in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880, 1880-1890," *Past and Present* 103 (1984): 131-172.

In one sense, this stretching has been enormously valuable. It has broken down rigid dichotomies that presented Europe after 1800 as modern, leaving the rest of the world and the rest of history as "other." It is now recognized that instead of mere "stagnation" and "crisis" as the normal condition of all times before 1800 and all regions outside of Europe, the reality is that economic development, large-scale urbanization and trade, and political centralization and territorial control were ongoing and expanding throughout the globe from at least the turn of the millennium. Yet there remains considerable debate regarding how, if almost all societies of the world were "early modern" for 800 years, that period should relate to world history.

On the one hand, once one starts looking back in time for evidence of growth, urbanization, long-distance trade, and political centralization, there seems no limit to how far back such trends go. Scholars such as Levine (2000) and Woodside (1998) have suggested pushing the "early modern" back through the Middle Ages in both Europe and China, so that "early modernity" begins almost immediately with the fading of antiquity. On the other hand, going forward, if early modernity begins in the Tang or with Domesday, and is globally pervasive by the sixteenth century, why and how

does the "modern" world only emerge belatedly and still relatively locally in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Wittrock 2000)?

If we look at Europe in the early eighteenth century, near the end of the "early modern" period, we would expect to see any "early modern" trends to be well established. We have already spoken of urbanization, economic growth, involvement in global trade, and territorial centralization and government bureaucratization as trends in this period that are evident both inside and outside of Europe.

We could also add the spread of printing and literacy (which, thanks to information on commercial publishing in Qing China, we also know to be comparably expanding there [Brokaw 1996, Rawski 2002]), and the growth of large, professional, infantry-dominant, artillery-supported militaries relying on gunpowder weapons (Parker 1988, McNeill 1989, Di Cosmo 2002) as additional pan-Eurasian late pre-industrial trends. We could also add vernacularization, also recently shown to be as widespread outside of Europe as inside (Pollock 1998, Rawski 1998, Lieberman 1999).

While it is more difficult to calculate the rise in productivity per person, since we lack precise information on the amount of land cleared and total population and output figures remain controversial, there is no doubt that

this improvement in yields coincided with a substantial increase in total population, urbanization, commercialization, and energy use.

End Notes

1. A more general statement of this project can be found in Charles Tilly, Louise A. Tilly, and Richard Tilly, "European Economic and Social History in the 1990s," *Journal of European Economic History* 20 (Winter 1991): 645-671.
2. See Pinchbeck (1981). For earlier examples of women's history of the period 1500 to 1800 which emphasized loss with industrialization, see Joan Thirsk, "Foreward," in Mary Prior, ed., *Women in English Society, 1500-1800* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 1-21. T.S. Ashton, in *The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Home University Books, 1948), p. 161, also anticipated the industrialization perspective when he wrote that through that process, the English averted a Malthusian crisis, "the Asian standards ... and unmechanized horrors" that afflicted "those who increase their numbers without passing through an Industrial Revolution." W.W. Rostow provided the authoritative statement of the industrialization paradigm in *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

3. See Donald N. McCloskey, "The Industrial Revolution, 1780-1860," in Roderick Floud and Donald N. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700*, Volume I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 103-127; Jeffrey Williamson, *Did British Capitalism Breed Inequality?* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985); Rondo Cameron, "La Révolution industrielle manqué," *Social Science History* 14 (1990): 559-565 and "A New View of European Industrialization," *The Economic History Review* 38 (1985): 1-23; John Komlos, "Thinking About the Industrial Revolution," *The Journal of European Economic History* 18 (1989): 191-206.
- Dissenting views include R.M. Hartwell, "Was There an Industrial Revolution?" *Social Science History* 14 (1990): 567-576 and David S. Landes, "The Fable of the Dead Horse; or "The Industrial Revolution Revisited," in Joel Mokyr, ed., *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 132-170. See also E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), who, focusing on the consequences for workers in the earlier putting-out system of production organized

by commercial capitalists, revived the cataclysmic view of the Industrial Revolution, emphasizing social and cultural as well as economic outcomes.

4. See Thirsk (1978), p. 106. Published at around the same time as Thirsk's study was Neil McKendrick's "Home Demand and Economic Growth: A New View of the Role of Women and Children in the Industrial Revolution," in Neil McKendrick, ed., *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honor of J.H. Plumb* (London: Europa, 1974), pp. 152-210, which argued that early industrial employment of several household members, including women and children, provided adequate combined wages to give, on the aggregate, a substantial boost to consumer spending, which promoted further expansion of markets. He admits that the group with household disposable incomes which made it possible to buy manufactured goods was only a small proportion of the working class, but argues that it was adequate to provide the impetus that led to self-sustaining industrialization.

5. Shamas (1990). Shamas' findings on the hierarchical structure of consumption and the shifts away from nourishing food involved in increased expenditure for caffeine drinks casts into doubt McKendrick's optimistic speculation in "Home Demand and Economic Growth." Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behavior and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 1988), looks at similar questions but poses them less in economic terms and more in cultural ones of meaning and values. She finds distinctive patterns of consumption with farm dwellers unlikely to buy the same goods as urban residents, and argues that simple emulation of one's betters is not an adequate explanation of consumption patterns. She concludes with a plea for greater exploration of social as well as economic factors shaping middle-class consumption.
6. Definition of gender in Hall (1991), Davidoff and Hall (1987).

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