

Anti-progress

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English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit Martin J. Wiener, Cambridge University Press.

Wieners is the most recent important contribution to the 'Decline of Britain' debate. It is important for two reasons: first, although it breaks no new ground, it deepens our understanding of this issue and second, the book serves as a timely reminder to those engaged in the study of economics that cultural and social factors are ignored at peril.

Wiener's thesis is an expansion of that first expounded by Correill Barnett nearly a decade ago in *The Collapse of British Power*. The argument is that the predominant values of British society were from the middle of the 19th century onwards (if not before) increasingly hostile to industrialism both as a social system and as a source of employment for the best and brightest. Wiener sees two major contributory reasons for this: that the values and life-style of the landed aristocracy survived despite the gradual (and overestimated) decline of their political power; and second the seductive attraction of the rural myth, what Wiener calls the "southern metaphor", that the 'real' Britain was agrarian, communitarian, conservative and spiritual rather than acquisitive, materialist and commercial ('the northern metaphor'). I suspect that no future social historian looking at the 19th and 20th centuries in Britain will be able to avoid the use of these terms.

The landed aristocracy survived in England for three reasons. In the first place, there had never been any major bar to the aristocracy engaging in commercial ventures (the Duke of Bridgewater for example) or to trade as a means of acquiring the wealth concomitant with ennoblement (the fortunes the De la Pole and Pitt families show this as clearly as any). Second, the industrial revolution in Britain was the first and hence initially

small-scale. The victory of the emerging middle classes was slow and conditional. The dissenters had sought wealth and prestige through manufacturing because traditional channels of advancement were closed to them. The Great Reform Act and the Local Government Reforms of the 1830s showed however that the landed Establishment would accept the rising bourgeoisie, which blurred the clash of values. Finally, the rising prestige of the public schools (in the wake of the Arnoldian reforms) with their classical curriculum and prefectorial values proved increasingly attractive to the commercial middle-classes to respectability and a model for newer grammar schools, weakening the vocational schooling required the second industrial revolution which began in the 1870s.

The southern metaphor drew its strength from both left and right: from the cultural diatribes of Ruskin and Matthew Arnold and the idealised medieval vision of William Morris. Conservative and Socialist critics of industrialism (and its attendant political philosophy of liberalism) advanced a notion of "the good life", seen as something beyond "mere" acquisition of material goods, as the development of the spiritual and personal worth of the individual. Victorian England was notionally and self-confessedly Christian. It was (and is) hard to square a religion which, deprecates this world in favour of the next, and continually lauds poverty over wealth with the single-minded pursuit of material possessions.

An educational system hostile to industrialism meant that engineering and the managerial professions were never able to match the status and continuing popularity of the older service professions (not least the colonial civil service where one could continue to be senior prefect for the rest of one's natural life). If education was hostile to industry, industry was suspicious of education preferring practical experience to 'book learning' since British industry had its roots in the empirical days of the first industrial revolution where practical expertise often was more important than theoretical knowledge.

The results were not just a declining industrial base - all industrial bases decline as one product or sector replaces another - but a continuing failure of British politicians (and industrialists and Trade Unionists) to confront the point that an industrial society can only be run with industrial values, which if one is looking for maximisation of wealth means those of the free market. Instead all major political parties became more or less obsessed with wealth distribution and ameliorating the "worst excesses of capitalism", at a time when British industrialists were anything but innovatively grasping and acquisitive, being content to hold what their grandfathers had established. Not the least of Wiener's achievements is to positively establish Stanley Baldwin as the first Butskellite.

Another achievement which cannot be ignored is the swipe Wiener takes (almost as an afterthought) at the notion of 'rationality' in econometric model-building. It was argued in *Essays on a Mature Economy* edited by McCloskey that the non-innovative policy of British industrialists at the end of the 19th century was perfectly rational. But as Wiener points out, 'rational' is a culture- and value-laden term. If a society is conservative then maintaining the status quo is 'perfectly rational'. That it is economically disastrous in terms of wealth creation is another matter again.

That is Wiener's thesis; what of its validity? If anything Wiener is too kind. He never really hammers the rural myth for what it is, not merely false, but pernicious, and reactionary, history. Historians of all ideological persuasions are agreed that pre-industrial society was a subsistence society for the bulk of the population, for whom rising material standards of living were anything but 'mere'. Wiener skirts round this central paradox that without industrialism standards of living would never have risen to the point where people could conceive of the good life in terms other than having enough to eat and more than one set of clothes. 'Self-Sufficiency' is a modern middle-class conceit; to our ancestors it was a grim and miserable reality from which they escaped with relief. Third World countries are not trying to industrialise because of a plot hatched by wicked multi-national

corporations but because on balance industrial society is better than the alternative. starvation.

Nevertheless there is too much that is excellent to end on a negative note. The book abounds in fascinating sidelights: I had never realised how long 'protecting the environment' had been a good Hampstead cause (well over a hundred years). The book is clearly written in jargon-free English. If £9.95 seems an excessive price for 217 pages I can only say I would happily have paid twice that amount.