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978-0-521-34434-0 - Britain Ascendant: Comparative Studies in Franco-British Economic History

Francois Crouzet

Excerpt

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Introduction

Why do many historians and social scientists work on foreign countries? Some of them are looking for roots which happen to be abroad. Some are attracted by exoticism, in a broad sense; for instance, some British scholars find in French history a strong and recurrent element of drama, which they feel to have been absent from their own country since the seventeenth century. Some hope to discover abroad a mirror for their motherland, that is some explanations of its development, identity and originality; or, by studying a country which has been or is a leader, they intend to obtain a better understanding of the general course of history. There is also the unreasoned and unreasoning attraction for some foreign culture – including political culture – whether it is close or distant, not to mention the random element of accident in individuals' careers, which has led some historians to become interested in alien lands.

I had no family connection with England, where I did not set foot before the age of twenty three, and I had taken German at school. A combination of several factors was thus needed to make me give up early plans to become a medievalist and to devote most of my research and teaching to Modern British history. I can mention, pell-mell: heavy doses of English novels (from H. Fielding to Agatha Christie – but all in French translation) as a teenager; admiration and gratitude towards Britain during the dark years 1940–4; a course of lectures on England in the eighteenth century, which I took when an *hypokhâgneux*; an interest in economic history, which I shared with a number of would-be historians of my generation (the depression and the war had taught us that economics were 'important'), and the feeling that it could be satisfied in the first industrial country (though the expression had not yet been coined); the opportunity, through a fellowship, to start graduate research in England; and more.

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There was rashness in such a reconversion, as ‘foreign’ historians labour under serious handicaps *vis-à-vis* those who work on the history of their own country. Whatever their efforts, there will be gaps in their knowledge of the country which they study and of its history, there will be failings in their understanding. They are like travellers, narrating their experiences, who may remark some significant details, which are too familiar to the local inhabitants to be noticed by them, but who, on the other hand, easily make gross blunders and pass preposterous judgements. There is, however, an area in which ‘foreign’ historians may hope to enjoy some comparative advantages and which is comparative history, but even this ground is not absolutely safe. Comparatist historians have to be proficient in the history of two countries (or more), but, by extending the scope of their studies, they risk becoming superficial or being ignorant of some crucial aspects; historians whose main interest is abroad also can lose touch with advanced research in their land of origin. There is, moreover, a danger of bias, to which I shall return later.

It must be added that comparative economic history has been dismissed as unscientific by some learned writers.¹ None the less, there are few works on broad problems of economic growth and even few textbooks of ‘national’ economic history, from which some kind of comparison between the experiences of different countries is absent. Cliometricians rightly argue that all historical explanations imply some counter-factual statements, so that it is better to make them explicit – and to test them. Likewise, I have reacted against the crude, uninformed, out-of-date comparisons with France, which were implicit or semi-implicit in many works – especially those belonging to the ‘whig’ tradition of economic history, and I have pleaded for serious and systematic comparisons. Though I can claim to have been interested in British economic and social history *per se*, and to have been fascinated by some of its *minutiae*, it has been difficult to keep comparisons with Continental countries, and especially with France, out of my thoughts. I also felt that this was a niche, in which I had an opportunity to make some contribution to scholarship.

This approach also supplies some vindication of the present volume – though the re-publication in book form of articles and essays has become so frequent in recent years that it does not need to be justified at length. This book has a central theme – and thus some unity of

¹ See chapter 2, pp. 55–7.

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purpose – which is the ascendancy of Britain, how it was established and maintained, from the late seventeenth century up to the end of the nineteenth. True enough, one chapter looks as though focused on Britain only, but its subject – capital formation – has loomed large in the study of the Industrial Revolution (a misnomer, according to Rondo Cameron, but which I go on using, *faute de mieux*),² which, of course, was crucial to Britain's mastery. The other chapters are devoted either to comparisons of development and growth in Britain, France and Western Europe, or to the movements of goods, capital, technologies, ideas and images in and out of Britain, or to the conflicts which have opposed England and France – and to their economic consequences.

Indeed, the Anglo-French couple has to be considered not only with a comparative and economic approach, but also from the conflictual and political point of view. Britain's rise to economic ascendancy was accompanied by a succession of military and political successes, which made her first a great power, then the super-power; those successes were mainly achieved over France. The relationship between those two drives towards ascendancy will be discussed later; even though the Industrial Revolution can not be seen as the product of British victories and conquests overseas, the latter at least helped to destroy the chances which Britain's competitors in the economic race might have had. Anyhow, rivalry and armed struggles between England and France were a constant and major factor in the history of the two countries, not only from the Glorious Revolution to Waterloo, but for almost the whole of their existence as nations. Thus some remarks about this conflict will not be ill-timed here.

Crécy, Poitiers, Agincourt, the siege of Orléans, La Hogue, Blenheim, Fontenoy, Trafalgar, Waterloo, Fashoda, Mers el Kebir, with many other lesser encounters . . . one battle after another: such is the record, unparalleled in the history of any other two countries, of the chronic and prolonged bouts of warfare down the centuries between the French and English. Since 1815, apart from a few clashes between the British and the forces of the Vichy government, the sound of battle has died away. But relations between our two countries have still often been stormy: 'ententes cordiales' have become unfriendly misunderstandings; wartime companionship in arms has involved bitter dis-

² R. Cameron, 'The Industrial Revolution: A Misnomer', in J. Schneider (ed.), *Wirtschaftskräfte und Wirtschaftswege: Festschrift für Hermann Kellenbenz* (Stuttgart, 1981), vol. 5, pp. 367–76.

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agreement. General de Gaulle therefore had some grounds for thinking that the Anglo-French conflict was much more deep-seated and long-standing than the enmity between France and Germany.³

The memory of these conflicts has been part of the folk memory of generations of British and French, and is still vivid today – particularly in Great Britain, where a feeling for the historic past, sustained as it is by education and the media, is far more acute than in France. The French, preoccupied by their earlier wars of religion and impulses towards general fratricide, mainly retain of their past whatever may serve to nourish their hatred of each other. The memory of ancient feuds with their neighbours is relegated to the lumber room.⁴ Of course, for the English, the memory of past feats of arms simply means victories over the French, while the French have fought many other enemies. Anyhow, the cult of Joan of Arc, once pushed to a height of hysteria, is now almost non-existent, whereas at Windsor the Waterloo Banquet is still an annual event at which the Duke of Wellington ceremoniously presents the Queen with a replica of a French eagle captured on the great day.

This endless strife has deeply affected the economic, social, political and even cultural evolution of the two countries. The awakening of national feeling on both sides of the Channel was undoubtedly due to the Hundred Years' War. Later, the wars against Louis XIV forced England into abandoning an archaic system of public finance and brought about the creation of the Bank of England (1694). While on the other side, the war of American independence destroyed the finances of the French monarchy and helped to spark off the Revolution.

But these interactions were not the result of war only. Over the centuries there have been incessant cross-Channel contacts and exchanges in both directions in various spheres of activity. Some of these – in the realm of culture and the arts – are not touched on in this book, despite their importance. But who is not aware of the influence of French art in England – from Norman churches to Post-Impressionism – or of English literature, notably Shakespeare and Walter Scott, on the French romantics? Not to mention the occasional waves of

³ I am grateful to M. Alain Peyrefitte, to whom General de Gaulle had made this remark, for authorising me to mention it here.

⁴ This paragraph and those which follow, up to p. 7, are reprinted, with a number of changes and cuts, from D. Johnson, F. Bédarida, F. Crouzet (eds.), *Britain and France. Ten Centuries* (Folkestone, 1980), pp. 13–15.

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anglomania and gallomania in fashions: after all, mini-skirts and long hair came from the English side of the Channel. The most chauvinist Frenchman has to admit that from the seventeenth century onwards France, however unwillingly, has absorbed more in the way of technology, ideas, political and economic knowhow from England than she has offered in return, in spite of having, up to the late nineteenth century, a larger population.

So, in spite of, perhaps even because of the quarrels and the hates that have divided them, there is a true symbiosis between England and France. Even more, one can find parallels in their histories. A narrow view, of short periods only, inevitably produces violent contrasts of the sort favoured by generations of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians: for Michelet England was the 'anti-France', France's exact opposite. English historians used to make a facile comparison between England's steady and progressive *evolution* with the violent *revolutions* that have characterised French history since 1789; forgetting that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was the English who were reputed to be turbulent and ungovernable.

In a recent book about the eighteenth century, Jeremy Black has written: 'Those who argued that the British and the French were both different and rivals were not fools'; and he makes a plea for the xenophobes, zealots and bigots of the time, who 'were more realistic assessors of their circumstances and predictors of the future than the intellectuals who wrote of the brotherhood of man. Britain and France were competing states, rival cultures and antagonistic people'.⁵

But on a longer view, and taking into account the historic experience of other European and (*a fortiori*) non-European peoples one is struck rather by the similarities and convergences. Whatever, for instance, the gap between British and French incomes per capita and its variations during the last forty years, it fades into insignificance when it is compared with incomes in the Third World. Historians, of course, enjoy minutely analysing small differences, but to the danger of short-sightedness.

England and France were the first 'nation states', with centralised monarchical government, and populations imbued with the feeling of belonging to one community.

England and France were the first large states to experience violent

⁵ J. Black, *Natural and Necessary Enemies. Anglo-French Relations in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1986), p. 211.

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revolutions, which in the long run (though more slowly in the case of France) led to liberal parliamentary systems pursuing moderate policies.

England and France were, the one the pioneer of industrial revolution and modern economic growth, the other the first to follow suit (though Belgium and Switzerland may be said to share this distinction).

England and France both gained by conquest, and finally lost, great colonial empires – even if that of France was only a smaller scale copy of the majestic British empire; both have left their mark, sometimes a deep one, on their erstwhile subject peoples.

With their countless ‘firsts’ (in the mountaineering sense) England and France have together, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, been the guiding lights of Europe and the world: leaders whose different qualities have complemented each other. Was not the modern world born of the monstrous union of those two great contemporaneous movements, the Industrial and the French Revolution? Is not ‘liberty’ an English discovery; ‘equality’ a French invention? With all the differences between their national ways of thought, England and France have originated and diffused the ideas of natural rights, the rights of man, liberty, toleration and democratic government. Alas, it is symbolic that in the same year, 1798, between them they also invented two great afflictions of the world today – France, compulsory military service; England, income tax! A more sombre remark is that the French Terror of 1793–4 was the harbinger and, in many respects, the inspirer of the mass murders and massacres which have prevailed in the twentieth century. Several recent writers have seen the repression by Republican troops of the Royalist insurrection in the Vendée as the precursor of ideological genocides. The British record of the time is not as bad, but the crushing of the 1798 Irish rebellion is not terribly different from what happened in the Vendée.⁶

In 1843 the socialist, Cabet, was to write: ‘France and England are marching together in the forefront of humankind; if one looks more closely at the progress of these two peoples in the vanguard one sees that they endlessly react upon one another, each guiding or being

⁶ The hulks on which French prisoners of war were detained were forerunners of modern extermination camps; HM Government indulged in ‘State Terrorism’, when abetting the Cadoudal plot to kill Bonaparte.

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guided by the other; sometimes France is at the head of the column, sometimes England takes the lead.'

It would, of course, be utterly foolish to replace the old devils of nationalism with a chauvinistic 'bi-nationalism', inasmuch as first France, then later England have irretrievably lost their former leadership (so that decline is to be added to their common heritage...).

Shared misfortune has not brought our countries closer; on the contrary it has caused sulks and snarls, crocodile tears over the neighbour's problems barely concealing smug satisfaction, indifference or even contempt for the way they do things the other side of the Channel; notwithstanding the fact that their problems of adaptation to the role of lesser powers, and to a stormy *fin de siècle* are broadly identical. The Straits of Dover remain a yawning gulf and the Channel Tunnel is unlikely to close the gap.

This is what can be called the Franco-British paradox: two countries that have hated each other yet have never ceased to borrow ideas, institutions, techniques, works of art from each other; for whom geographical propinquity has only served to increase psychological alienation, each viewing his neighbour as the personification of *foreignness*. Their ancient hates may now be damped down, but so too are the warmly affectionate feelings of the francophile and anglophile minorities.⁷

Admittedly, specificities and differences remain momentous. After all, the history of England is a success story, even in its decline, the history of a people who have played their cards with skill. The history of France, in a sense, is nothing but a preposterous tragi-comedy of lost opportunities, good luck misused, disasters following on achievements. It is odd that so far she has managed to survive, though the end of the road may not be far away; her chances of survival have seriously fallen since 1981 and in the next century she may only be a geographical expression, a territory mainly inhabited by people of Arabic and

⁷ The British and the French have even managed to hate each other in different ways. French francophobia was based upon grievances related to events which had actually happened – in the past: for instance the burning of Joan of Arc, the loss of Canada, the ill-treatment of prisoners of war, the peace treaties of 1814 and 1815; it involved charges of insolence, brutality, perfidy, hypocrisy, but, most of the time, was not insulting. Conan Doyle wrote, during the Boer war, that it was normal for the French to hate the British whose Empire was built upon the ruins of French greatness. On the other hand, English Francophobia was, basically, a quasi-physical and racial dislike of the French and their ways; and it also thrived upon phantasms, such as popish plots and invasion scares – or Palmerston's idea that the French hated England from the depth of their hearts and were only dreaming of humiliating her; the British attitude also was, quite often, deliberately offensive.

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African origin: *Finis Galliae*. On the other hand, Britain has been confidently expected to become the Japan of the 1990s; though this prediction appears to have soon faded, a British Renaissance has obviously taken place in the 1980s.

A friendly reviewer has defined me as ‘a French francophile anglophile’,⁸ and there is also the warning, given on the occasion of the reprinting of the francophile John Stuart Mill’s *Essays*, about the danger of ‘going native in the foreign culture’ which one studies, especially ‘for the writer who, while nurturing a vivid sense of alienation, remains practically and . . . emotionally implicated in his own society’.⁹

It would be difficult to plead not guilty on those counts, except that strict objectivity and complete detachment are not easy when one has known the traumas of 1940, 1968 and 1981 and when living under a régime one abhors. Moreover, the problem of economic growth – and specially of French growth – always has had political undertones; it can not be de-politised and sanitised, because of a constant inter-play between the present and the past. The depression of the 1930s, the collapse of 1940, the difficult recovery of the late 1940s, all threw a dark shadow upon the whole of French economic history; it was natural thus for French writers to denounce the failings of capitalism, for Americans, who discovered in 1944–5 a starving and medieval-looking country, to think that there always had been something seriously wrong with its economy. Unexpectedly, however, came the *Trente Glorieuses*, the thirty years or so of fast economic growth and change from the 1950s to the 1970s. Their prosperity reverberated over views of the past; historians wondered whether, after all, the French people

⁸ R. Cameron, ‘Was England Really Superior to France?’, *Journal of Economic History*, XLVI, 4, December 1986, p. 1037.

⁹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 November 1985, p. 1251. At the other extreme, there is the total insularity, displayed in the same weekly (2–8 September 1988, p. 969), in a review of a book on *The Hundred Years War*, whose author was so rebuffed:

Whether the French ‘had the last laugh’, as he also maintains, is more debatable. In the sense that the English were driven from France, obviously so. But the long-term legacy of the war which the French won was the institutions of the *ancien régime*: the *gabelle*, the *aides*, the *taille*, a standing army, a privileged nobility and bureaucracy, and an overtaxed peasantry. If the war had any corresponding long-term effect on England, it was to confirm the position of Parliament and the necessity for Parliamentary consent to taxation. In its dual influence on the constitutions and social structures of the two countries, the war helped to create the preconditions for a revolution in France and for its avoidance in England.

The reviewer appears to have forgotten that two revolutions had happened in England well before 1789!

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were as unfit for industrialisation as it had been previously maintained; the result was the emergence of ‘revisionism’, while marxists gave up economic history, in disgust, and turned to social history or to other fields, where they could go on denouncing exploitation and immiseration. Since 1981, there has been a new change of positions. Supporters of the Socialist régime have praised the achievements of capitalism *à la française*, that is, subordinated to the State, controlled and directed by Government. Liberal economists, on the other hand, see France going the way of the Argentine under Peron, of Rumania under Ceausescu, etc., with its economy being irretrievably wrecked by a tyranny; the mere fact that such a disaster can happen demonstrates that the French economy was not sound, but brittle and weak; once again the look at the past has become dim and gloomy, and historians are searching for explanations of *die Französische Katastrophe*. Vice versa, the economic decline of Britain in the post-1945 period and her retreat from Empire have strongly brought out her power and ascendancy before 1914; they have also emphasised how exceptional the latter had been, and that they were man-made and transitory, instead of God-given and permanent as the Victorians had believed. Moreover, in this light, the major question is not ‘Why did Britain decline?’, but ‘Why was she – for a century at least – the dominant economy and the only super-power?’ On the other hand, if Britain’s Renaissance assumes permanence, economic historians will have to take new view-points.

The author of a book like the present one is faced at the start with a dilemma: will it be a mere reprint, with no changes in the original papers? Or have the latter to be altered and recast, in order to take into account recent research – and also eventual changes in the writer’s views? Actually, a compromise solution has been chosen (it may give the worst of both worlds!): articles have been reprinted as they were when published, but for some corrections in the form or the substance – and also some cuts, especially in footnotes. However, in cases when recent research had produced some significant findings, the latter have been summarised, either in footnotes or in appendices to some chapters. I have not, however, tried to be exhaustive and to bring up-to-date the whole of the reprinted articles; sometimes, I only have supplied a short list of ‘additional readings’. On the other hand, the first of the articles which are reprinted here was the starting point for a debate – about the British and French economies in the eighteenth

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century; I have tried, in a new essay (Chapter 2), to strike the balance of those discussions and to give my own afterthoughts on this problem. I have not attempted, however, to iron out the differences or – possibly – contradictions between the hypotheses which I have suggested at various times over the years.

It would be unfair to end this introduction without acknowledging my debt both to individual British colleagues and friends, and, more generally, to the ‘school’ of British economic historians as a whole. The former often have had the doubtful privilege of being first to hear, in lecture- or seminar-room, early drafts of most of the papers which follow; their comments and criticisms have been invaluable. They and also many past and present British and American writers, who I have never met, but whom I diligently read, have greatly helped me to be freed from the stifling atmosphere which prevailed in French academic and intellectual circles. It is now widely recognised that, for two generations, left-wingers have imposed in France a kind of intellectual terrorism (which, moreover, since 1981, has had the full force of the State apparatus behind it). Most historians have had to pay at least lip-service to a crude and vulgar marxism, to vituperate against feudalism and capitalism and to indulge in an extreme and ridiculous miserabilism (the latter is not absent from British writings, but to a lesser extent); dissidents have been persecuted, abused or at least ignored. Moreover, the centralised and hierarchised system, which prevailed – and still prevails to some extent – in French universities, and also a genuine, but misplaced, devotion to some *pontifes*, have largely crippled discussions among historians. So simplistic, obsolete and even grotesque concepts or views (like Simiand’s A and B phases) have enjoyed far too long a lease of life. To make things worse, the various factions into which French historians are divided – for both ideological and institutional reasons – have suffered from inward-looking parochialism; each one of them has often ignored all work coming from a different group.

This is not to deny that, in the last decades, France has had many first-class historians – though a frequent mistake abroad is to believe that they all have been *Annalistes* or devotees of *la nouvelle histoire*. But the British have no ground for an inferiority complex and some recent lamentations on the decline of British history – and especially of economic history – have gone much too far.

Anyhow, I have been much influenced by the British school of