

CONTINUITY, CHANCE AND CHANGE

The character of the
industrial revolution in England

E. A. WRIGLEY



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Introduction

This book began as the Ellen McArthur lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge in the Lent Term 1987. The invitation extended to me by the Managers of the Fund to deliver the lectures was both an honour that I deeply appreciated, and an opportunity that was most welcome in that I had been turning over in my mind for some time a topic that seemed appropriate for the lectures. Receiving the invitation also obliged me to make a decision over which I might otherwise have deliberated much longer. After many years spent in work principally concerned with the population history of England, I had returned increasingly to my first main research interest, the better understanding of the industrial revolution. I was keen to look again both at some very general issues of interpretation and at a number of substantive matters where there seemed hope of progress. My dilemma lay in deciding between a large-scale general book on the industrial revolution to be written only after carrying out the substantive work and a short, programmatic review. The former could not have been written for several years; the latter, since it could be written in advance of carrying out most of the empirical work, could be embarked on forthwith. The Managers' invitation decided me in favour of the latter.

There was a further decision to be made when the lectures had been delivered. Some earlier Ellen McArthur lectures were published with little change from the form in which they were delivered; others have been much extended and re-written before publication. I was predisposed to make as little change as possible to the original text, given the circumstances in which the lectures came to be written. In

the event, the present text differs rather more from the original than I had initially envisaged. First, it seemed useful at several points in the text to include figures or tables. In some cases the development of the argument was modified by the inclusion of the new material. Second, the constraints of a set of public lectures, each intended to be delivered in fifty-five to sixty minutes, are arbitrary, imposing a close similarity of length between the lectures and making it difficult to avoid compressing some passages excessively. Converted to a written form the lectures were freed from these constraints, and some sections are rather longer in consequence. Third, public lectures have no footnotes as delivered. Most of the footnotes that have now been incorporated into the text were written after the lectures were given. Where the footnotes dealt with substantive questions, rather than simply providing authority for quotations and assertions in the main body of the text, their writing sometimes meant changing the main text.

For all these reasons the present text and the original text differ somewhat. There has, however, been no change to the scope or thrust of the argument. The four chapters of the present book were the four lectures and the sequence of the argument in each of them retains its original form. Nor have I modified the literary style of the lectures, other than marginally. The style betrays the origin of the work as the spoken rather than the written word. It remains assertive, and perhaps occasionally controversial in tone; programmatic rather than monographic; as much intended to provoke as to persuade.

By an astounding irony of modern historiography, the industrial revolution, whose intrinsic interest and importance should make it the most exciting topic of study among all the 'big' issues of the history of the development of the modern world, has become a dull subject that slips into focus and out again, uncomfortably peripheral to the vision of many historians. The stage is peopled with other characters. Hamlet is often performed without the Prince of Denmark.

There are good reasons why this should be so. No one can be in doubt about the extent of the difference between the pre-industrial world and the world today. The industrial revolution is a convenient

label to attach to that part of the transformation which is principally economic in nature. But labelling falls well short of coherent description, much less convincing explanation, and in their absence interest in the phenomenon has languished. The term industrial revolution has come to carry connotations and to bear meanings that increasingly fail to 'save the phenomena'.

My main aim in the lectures was to question the appropriateness of the view that the industrial revolution was a cumulative, progressive, unitary phenomenon. Much writing about it reflects this assumption either explicitly or implicitly, but there are several considerations that tell strongly against this view, and these are developed in the body of the book. As a convenient expository device, I have leaned heavily on the writings of the classical economists to clarify the nature of the problem. The economic growth process that Adam Smith described was indeed a cumulative, progressive and unitary phenomenon, which embraced a variety of changes in political, legal and social structures and attitudes as well as economic change. But, for reasons cogently argued by Smith himself and his successors, the momentum of growth was to be expected to peter out after a time, arrested by changes endogenous to the growth process itself, and giving rise in due course to the supervention of the stationary state. Moreover, the classical economists were unanimous in doubting whether even the then prevailing level of real wages could be sustained indefinitely. Future falls were more probable than future rises. A steady and substantial improvement in real wages for the mass of the population was a utopian pipe-dream, not a possibility that a rational and well-informed man could plausibly entertain, however much he might wish to see it occur. Yet a sustained rise in real wages has come to be regarded as one of the key distinguishing features of the industrial revolution.

Clearly we are faced with a paradox. How could it be that the best informed contemporaries, who lived through the decades which, by the conventional chronology of later writing, included the early stages of the industrial revolution, and who concentrated their formidable intellectual powers upon the behaviour of the economy, should not merely have been unaware of the developments seen by later generations as heralding a new age, but should have strongly and explicitly rejected the possibility of the change which was later