

SELECTED CONTROVERSIES CONCERNING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

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The Industrial Revolution occupies a vast realm in the historiographical landscape, packed full of controversies. The political bias of both left and right get full play in this realm. Though these are only some of the controversies concerning this subject, the below contains a useful start.

1. When and what was it?: The dates normally given are c. 1770-1850, but much variation exists. One historian, J.V. Nef, has looked as far back as the mid-sixteenth century. Another, W.W. Rostow, packs the "initial surge" for it into 1783-1802. Unlike political events such as wars and monarchs' reigns, no tight chronology can easily be made for the industrial revolution because of its slow, broad nature. Indeed, there are those who question why it should even be called a "revolution," since this process took many decades and was not a quick, climatic event. Also, since this process involved many widespread, important changes in society's economic and social organization, much controversy exists on what it involved, when it did so, and to what extent. Such changes as the factory system, the putting out system's rise and fall in this same period, urbanization, mechanization and the application of technology and inanimate power sources (water first, then steam in cotton textiles), the breakdown of paternalism and the rise of wage labor, population growth, the relative decline of agriculture's importance, etc. are some of the major characteristics to consider. Also--do not overemphasize how early these changes occurred: In 1850, agriculture was still the leading sector in contribution to the GDP of England, with roughly 45-50% of the total.
2. The demographic revolution: There was a huge increase in England's population during the general time frame of the industrial revolution--from about 6 million in 1741 to 17 million in 1850. One controversy surrounds how and whether the industrial revolution caused or allowed this unprecedented growth to occur. The other main controversy surrounds whether this growth was due to rising fertility, falling mortality, or some combination of both. Except for smallpox inoculation, modern medicine most likely had little to do with this growth at this time.
3. Why was England first?: Europe had been a fairly primitive part of the world for the millenium prior to 1500, and England was a relatively backward part of Europe during this period. (Humbling, but true). The only worthwhile English export for centuries had been raw wool, or (later) woollen cloth. So--how did this relatively resource-barren island leap ahead to undergo first the industrial revolution? A list of likely factors can or will normally include the following considerations: England's leadership in foreign trade, easy access to foreign markets and sources of raw materials since the Royal Navy reigned supreme over the seas, possession of the most advanced banking and financial sector, a relatively innovative agricultural sector, relatively plentiful, cheap labor, a government that was friendly to commercial and industrial interests, a favorable legal environment that was relatively non-capricious and which protected private property, a class of innovative, profit-seeking entrepreneurs who had gained much experience through the commercial revolution, and geographical advantages, such as closeness to the sea for most of the nation, and which made road, canal, and railroad building and transport relatively easy. Don't look for a monocause here!

4. Standard of living: An endless dispute (presently in a state of relative quiescence) has raged between those who say the standard of living rose for the working class in this period, and those who say it didn't. The "optimists," who are normally right-wingers, say it rose, while the "pessimists," who are normally on the left, say it fell. Complicating this whole dispute, and probably making it impossible to settle satisfactorily for all parties involved, is the lack of reliable national statistics of conditions in this and earlier periods, and the widely varying experiences of different regions within Britain itself. For it was only during the time of the industrial revolution itself that national economic integration occurred to the extent we can seriously discuss such entities as a national market or wage rates. Also of relevance is a quality of life argument, which sees factory work and urban life as dehumanizing due to machines pacing work and the creation of a wage-paid proletariat that lack independent access to the means of production.

5. The agricultural revolution: This deals with the application of new techniques and organizational patterns being applied to farming. While not directly tied to the industrial revolution, it occurred during much of the same time period. The agricultural sector's increasing productivity helped England to support its own population without (in this time period) having to rely excessively upon foreign imports of food. New techniques such as new forms of crop rotation and the end of the open field system were introduced in this time, spread through such publicists of the new agriculture like Arthur Young. Technological innovations such as Jethro Tull's seed drill and the Rotherham triangular plow began to be used during this period. The value of manure to fertilize the land became more widely known. However, it cannot be emphasized enough that widespread regional variations existed within England as to how fast such innovations were introduced, and of their piecemeal implementation. The Rotherham plow was patented in 1730, but was not extensively used until the 1820's, for instance. Though a fair number of innovative landlords existed (such as "Farmer George"--King George III), many weren't so innovative, and (especially) many tenant farmers resisted change.

6. Enclosures: A related issue to the agricultural revolution concerns the enclosure of common lands produced by the open field system. Whether by parliamentary act or private purchases, many of these commons were enclosed, upon which various cottagers and poor rural laborers had eked out a living in the past. The trade-off involved gaining greatly improved productivity due to the consolidation of previously scattered landholdings, and the elimination of the backward open field system at the expense of creating an impoverished "rural proletariat" that worked as day laborers or tenants upon large estates. However, the old view that the enclosure movement (whose peak was in 1760-1815) created a large pool of cheap labor through emptying out the countryside for factories to draw upon has suffered a number of serious blows in more recent years. For instance, the rural population of England grew almost as fast as the urban in the 1770-1850 period, and rural abandonment did not occur until the second half of the nineteenth century. Also, because of the regional nature of the economy, seldom did laborers seeking work move far away from where they had been raised, so seldom did poor southern farm laborers directly move to working in Lancashire cotton mills.

While many other controversies and issues exist concerning the industrial revolution, this brief overview of some of them may help you in looking at this sprawling subject.

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DISCOURAGE PEOPLE FROM GOING TO THEM.