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# Gentry culture and the stifling of industry

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ABSTRACT

The paper determines the role of the gentry in stifling the manufacturing development of formerly industrial southern England. An increasing divergence in economic composition between south and north is discussed, with particular reference to de-industrialisation in the former. The expanding estate system and emergence of a specific culture among landowners is described. Finally the case is made that this gentry culture was instrumental in reducing or redirecting southern enterprise during the industrial revolution.



## 1. Introduction: a role for culture in the industrial revolution?

Explanations of the English industrial revolution are heavily, often exclusively, materialistic. They tend to propose what economists think of as objective factors, as often as not meaning ones that can be readily measured. Despite decades of scepticism, explanations still occasionally embody the notion of a single independent variable or spark that sets the remainder of the economy alight. Ideas, and even politics, are seldom given much attention, though arguments are emerging that do place these at the centre of analysis rather than treating them merely as enabling factors. Given the recent recognition of the significance of these other 'soft' variables, is there perhaps also a role for culture?

This paper will discuss how culture helped to stifle industry in its old heartland of the south of England. The culture in question was that of the gentry, a major part of the landowning class. The argument is that, through hostility or indifference, gentry culture discouraged industry in the South. But from the point of view of the country as a whole the burgeoning power of market competition was strong enough to overcome the negative effects. Manufacturing gained (perversely enough) from being free to concentrate and reap the gains of agglomeration in the North. The process enabled the regions of England to trade on their comparative advantage. Decline and growth occurred simultaneously but it is a confusion to think one caused the other: both were responding, though in opposite ways, to the expansion of the market. An extensive historical set-up is needed to elucidate all this, particularly as unfamiliar aspects of English geography and industrial history are involved.

Writings on culture by general historians do not seem to tackle the balance of hard and soft variables directly, although there is now an increasing volume of work on the subsidiary matter of consumption, much of it to do with the spread of fashionable new items. In economic history a major study that is to some extent related to this is Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, which stresses the effects on their effort and attitude of tempting workers to purchase novel goods.[1] Douglass North is responsible for drawing attention to the positive role of institutions and in his more recent work to considering as central the elite's enigmatic shift from rent-seeking to competing in markets – thereby embracing an 'open access order.'[2] Closely associated with this is the 'rights hypothesis', usually attributed to Max Weber but made more explicit by Talcott Parsons: it assumes that precise and legally defensible property rights were established after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, reducing transaction costs and enabling the market economy to grow, *ipso facto* permitting England to be first with industrial revolution.[3]

The pure realm of ideas, particularly the spur to action given by the optimism of the Enlightenment, is taken seriously by Deirdre McCloskey and Joel Mokyr.[4] Ideas here are a sort of force-multiplier, since these authorities are well aware that other circumstances were converging on growth in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. The Enlightenment is seen as a great cultural shift.

[1] de Vries, J., 2008. The Industrious Revolution. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
[2] North, D.C., Wallis, J.J., Weingast, B.R., 2007. Limited access order in the developing world: a new approach to the problem of development. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4359.
[3] Heller, M.G., 2009. Capitalism, Institutions, and Economic Development. Routledge, London, pp. 19, 103.
[4] McCloskey, D., 2009. Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Industrial Revolution (MS., McCloskey's website); Mokyr, J., 2005. The intellectual origins of modern economic growth. Journal of Economic History 65(2), 285–351.

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Mainstream economists find all this too vague or subjective to take seriously but anyone who reads contemporary documents (and not just exhortations) will scarcely share their scepticism, although it remains that neither the Enlightenment, the open access order nor the rights hypothesis account for the regional pattern of change. Their Achilles heel is that they were all equally compatible with the relatively unfamiliar de-industrialisation of southern England and the well-known industrialisation of the North. Spurs to positive action, yes, but only when other factors were set fair.

Underpinning the Enlightenment, it has long been acknowledged that a craft or artisan tradition or culture had arisen in England.[5] 'Tweaking' by craftsmen was widely forthcoming, enabling theoretical ideas to be embodied in practical devices called at the time 'engines' (which did not then carry the connotation that they must be driven by inanimate power). This is usually presented as a special feature of the country and there was indeed ferment and a great array of loosely linked craft networks. It is usual to note the preponderant role of religious non-conformists among the men involved (they were almost wholly men). Even so, their religious beliefs often differed substantially, at least in their own eyes, and the everyday work they did varied according to trade, industry and locality. Nor is their origin especially well explained, except by tracing the detail of religious and political history and offering only a path-dependent account of infinite regress. Clearly, too, the scale and activity of the craft culture, or sub-culture, was influenced by the increased demand induced by economic expansion, i.e. the argument can become circular.

Resolving the problem of growth requires some background in early modern and early industrial history, as well as in English historical geography. This is unavoidable in order to grasp where culture made its play – without such a foundation any appeal to culture must remain unclear, over-generalised and readily dismissible by materialists. Three or four other, diverse methodological observations also inform what follows and may be helpful. They are intended to offset the tendency in economics to generalise via stereotyped categories not easily made to reflect historical facts, which is not to say the standard categories should be dropped or that the effort to detect central tendencies should be forgone. But it needs be supplemented. First, England presented an intricate physical landscape and an evolving society with a striking measure of individuality. Faithfully representing all of this, were it possible, would lead to excessive detail and a 'thicket of causes', yet treating only national economic averages leans too far in the other direction: developments in different regions must be considered, since the fact of their divergence throws light on important processes. Secondly, field observation, familiar to earlier generations of economic historians who tramped the ground they wrote about, offers useful clues and is a corrective to over-generalisation. Thirdly, the networks of family relations and genealogies of intermarriages and connections are also informative, though almost entirely ignored by modern economic historians, who work in highly aggregative terms. Fourthly, and almost as neglected, is the significance of amenity considerations for the levels and directions of both investment and consumption. Concern for the economy's demand side has to some extent been resurrected but this chiefly refers to commodities and not to the improvement or adornment of the physical environment.

The remainder of this paper is arranged in the following six sections: the relevance to economic growth of the divide between a de-industrialising South and industrialising North of England; gentrification; the expansion of estates in the South; the creation of a gentry culture; the withering of enterprise in the South; and finally the case for thinking that culture played a significant role in stifling or re-directing southern enterprise.

## 2. Regional bifurcation

Industrialisation is commonly discussed nationally but was in reality regional or even local.[6] Distributions of economic activity may be described in various ways, according to purpose, but the essentials were a slowly industrialising North of England (the Highland Zone) and a slowly de-industrialising south (the Lowland Zone), with in addition an important role for London. Although there were factors common to the whole country and some elements of a national market appeared early, a purely national emphasis is misleading; the two main regions were strikingly different in topography, soils and climate, and hence in the relative cost of producing many foodstuffs and manufactures under any given technology.

The usual explanations of industrialisation strongly feature new machinery, especially when powered by steam, which leads to assigning the central role to coal. This inevitably seems to accord with the growth of industry in the North. But industry was growing there long before any significant generation of power using coal, while trades vital for inventiveness – notably clock and watchmaking in south Lancashire – used little fuel. These were key trades because they solved complex mechanical problems and individuals from them were later brought into solve what were probably lesser difficulties in mechanising cotton production. Hundreds, probably thousands, of these men worked independently in their own little properties.

Other industries, together with intensive dairying, also emerged in north-west England before there was any substantial shift to using steam engines or the grouping of workers in factories.[7] Two-thirds of farms there are calculated to have acquired some capital as a result of inflation in the sixteenth century; this capital flowed into the concentration of independent businesses that not only supplied and competed with one another but actually imported some of their raw materials. For a long time the industrialists lived rather frugally and it was only later, in the eighteenth century, that the richer ones began to mingle with the southern gentry and adopt their more showy lifestyle. The gentry in the north-west had few contacts with London.

The comparative advantage of the South increasingly lay in agriculture, particularly supplying the growing London food market. This inspired southern landowners to buy up leases and parcels of land that came on the market, eroding the small farmer class and creating instead large farms run by substantial tenants and worked by wage labour. The South had few industrial concentrations but during the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries it possessed a wide scatter of small works making in total what was then the full product range: textiles, ironwork, and consumer goods like buttons and boots that every district needed. With only a limited development of transport and communications, such businesses found a market in their own localities. They nevertheless slowly withered away over two centuries, leaving the region to focus on the production and processing of food, and on conveying it to London. David Rollison has observed that a formerly industrial part of Gloucestershire was therefore 'no less transformed by the industrial revolution than

[5] Jones, E.L., 1984. Subculture and market. Economic Development and Cultural Change 32(4), 76–77.

[6] Foster, C.F., Jones, E.L., 2011. Industrialisation and Deindustrialisation: England Divides. mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de.

[7] See especially: Foster, C.F., 2004. Capital and Innovation. Arley Hall Press, Northwich.