

Modernity and conservatism: British society on the eve of industrialisation

Paul Langford

Lincoln College, University of Oxford, Oxford, U.K.

One of the advantages of appearing on the second day of a meeting like this is that I have some sense of where the main emphases are likely to be placed and I can begin erecting some very preliminary defensive outworks that may at least deter the first wave of dialectical combatants. I cannot hope to do more than that, but here are two precautionary apologies.

I had a moment of near panic yesterday afternoon as I listened to Fuat Keyman's wonderfully lucid outline of the various theoretical approaches to the writing of history. It struck me that I did not seem to fit in any of these categories. It also struck me that I probably did fit into one of these categories without even being aware that I did. You have in front of you one of the unregenerate of British empirical historians, and you have got me for the next forty-five minutes or so, so you will just have to put up with it. I shall be trying to show you how certain kinds of sources in my period of history, in my little patch of history, can be used to cast new lights on a rather familiar problem. I hope to that extent I come within the ambit of this conference which is about new approaches to European history. I do not find the discussion of methodology at all unhelpful, and in fact, I found yesterday's discussions fascinating and thought-provoking. But I also think one of the interesting things about seeing historians in action is to observe the characteristic ways in which a discipline can be shaped and used by different kinds of people. Historians do not wear white coats, and *pace* Derek and John, I don't think even historical sociologists wear white coats. Very

different approaches can be adopted to the same material and those approaches are often dictated by traits of personality and habits of mind.

I am operating in a pretty restricted sphere, of course, and again I can only say that you will have to bear with me. Some of you may be familiar with the novels of Henry Fielding, and may remember that there occurs in his *Tom Jones* a bitter but also refined theological debate between two clerics, which ends with one of them saying (I paraphrase) "when I mean Christianity I mean the Church, and when I mean the Church I mean the Church of England." Well, when I say the West I usually mean Western Europe, when I say Western Europe I usually mean Britain, when I say Britain I usually mean England, and when I say England, I am afraid, I usually mean those eight to nine hundred thousand people who had such a an important influence on the affairs of a country that for a short while in the long span of human history had such a disproportionate influence on the world at large. I do not defend such parochialism, far from it. But it is a tiny canvas on which I am painting and I might as well admit it. I would at least like to think that miniaturism of this kind can have significance for the 'big picture'.

Yesterday we had a fascinating display of extremely elegant and impressive styles. I thought John asked an old question but answered it with a quite dazzling array of diverse evidence to present a highly original argument. Derek was asking new questions about a city that was drenched in European history yet in some sense strangely marginal to some of the central themes of European history. What I am doing is to ask some pretty old questions about an area of history that is rather well-known, but which continues to provoke divergent views and judgements.

In recent years, study of the eighteenth century has generated very different portrayals of British society. Some have emphasised its static, hierarchical and conservative tendencies, others its vitality, instability and flexibility. Comparisons with other European societies have also produced major divergences, some emphasising Britain's involvement in European modes of thought and its adoption of recognisably Continental machinery of government, others insisting on its idiosyncratic intellectual tradition and its resistance to the prevailing political fashions of other states, whether despotic or democratic. My own preference is very much for the second option in each case, that is for a rapidly changing society but one that remained in many ways insular and eccentric. However, my prime object here is to examine some of the key concerns and kinds of evidence that need to be considered when these diverse models are considered.

Firstly, I want to stress that much of the disagreement results from the

standpoint adopted rather than the subject being inspected. Judgments tend to be based on an implicit, and sometimes explicit, comparison with other societies, or other hypothetical possibilities. Surprising though it may seem, numerous evaluations still assume what is generally called a 'Whiggish' perspective, that is, a tendency to award marks to the eighteenth century in proportion as it matches modern values. This can cut different ways, of course. Eighteenth century society can be considered as 'modernising' in its unabashed commercialism, but also regressive in various ways, for instance, in its marginalisation of women or in its deference to aristocratic leadership. It should be added that these comparisons also assume characterisations of earlier period that are highly contestable. To take two obvious examples, studies of gender and class often imply a 'world we have lost', a pre-capitalist state of bliss, which might well have never existed. In what follows I wish to emphasise a standpoint that has the advantage of being relatively easy to describe and assess. This is the standpoint provided by contemporary comparisons with other European societies, as made by other Europeans. This is, of course, no more neutral than any other stance, but it does have the advantage of highlighting what seemed distinctive at the time, a valuable perspective which sometimes gets lost in the historiography.

A preliminary point. Foreigners were interested in eighteenth century Britain as never before, precisely because it seemed so successful, powerful and progressive. When they analysed its character they often did so either to criticise or defend other societies. They also had particular preoccupations and individual interests. None the less, what is striking is the relative unanimity of view that they achieved when characterising what was widely considered up until the 1790s, Europe's most 'modern' society, and even after that its most potent. This last point matters because it explains something that would otherwise be puzzling, the extraordinary interest shown in Britain at this time. In the seventeenth century it was still possible to think of the English as anarchic, ungovernable, quixotic, above all insignificant, except as a minor, culturally intriguing example of insularity. But by the eighteenth century Britain had astonished the world by its military prowess against a French monarchy that was on almost every criterion far superior in resources. It was also the prime example, perhaps with the Dutch, of that highly developed commercial phase of civilisation that contemporary philosophers took to be the destiny of Western society in an age of Enlightenment. Above all it seemed to be the supreme instance of a state that had combined liberty with stability. It is now fashionable to regard the Revolution of 1688 as little more than a palace revolution of alternatively a minor adjustment in the capitalist order of things. But in the eighteenth century it was thought a

remarkable achievement, to the extent that it limited monarch without unleashing republicanism, it created a pluralistic and tolerant tradition in matters of religion, without uprooting Christianity, and it gave practical power to a landed elite, without inhibiting commercial and colonial growth. And finally, rightly or wrongly, Britain was believed to have led the way to a new empirically rational and coherently scientific view of the world. Today historians debate whether there is anything that can be called an English Enlightenment. At the time Continental thinkers had enormous respect for the English tradition of thought as represented by Bacon, Newton and Locke. All this meant that what was happening in Britain was thought to be the likely way of the future, or at least to have much to reveal about it. That could certainly not have been said before the eighteenth century. Even when things went wrong, they went wrong in a way that seemed strangely futuristic. For instance the disastrous war with the American Colonies which many thought would finish Britain both as commercial and military power, looked peculiarly revolutionary, the first example of the successful revolt of a European settler colony, rich in implications for the future of the world's empire. The result was that at least from the time of Voltaire's path-breaking *Letters on England* in the 1730s, close interest was shown in England. By the end of the centuries the flow both of travellers and published travellers was large and growing rapidly. This body of commentary is, to say the say, an interest source of enlightenment on what observers thought most impressive, and of course, most alarming about the British.

It seemed a fair assumption that whatever explained the new importance of Britain was to be credited more to its people than its rulers. There were other successful states in the eighteenth century; Sweden at its commencement, Prussia later on. But it was easy to suppose that in their cases unusual powers of leadership were at work, Charles XII and Frederick II. Even the wildest enthusiasts for the Hanoverian regime did not, so far as I am aware, claim that George I or George II or George III was personally responsible for the extraordinary feats of the state he reigned over. This lent a special significance to analyses of the distinctive features of British society. Whatever was peculiar to the character of this small island people might well hold the key to that ultimate state secret, the capacity to exert an influence on the world at large out of all proportion to demographic size and physical resources.

Three major concerns predominate:

1. There was overwhelming agreement that Britain's political system was intensely responsive to the requirements of a commercially vigorous society. This had little to do with its liberal credentials. Foreigners often overrated the

democratic features of the British constitution, but they increasingly recognised its deficiencies, especially its corruption. What they never denied was its accessibility to the forces and interests that gave Britain the edge in competing for international markets. I would argue that historians of Parliament have been narrow-minded in their concentration on the arguments about representation and reform, and have ignored its functional efficiency in accommodating the legislative demands of people who were often not directly represented at all. Of course, from the 1770s onwards the British themselves were acutely interested in the deficiencies of Parliament. They emphasised the extent to which royal corruption was making the House of Commons merely the tool of the Crown; they showed how the steady erosion of electoral independence was turning numerous constituencies into rotten boroughs controlled by mere traffickers in votes; they derided a franchise that left nine-tenths of the adult male population without a say in the election of MPs; and they stressed the dominance of the legislature by aristocratic landowners. All this belongs in a story of mounting demands for adequate middle-class representation, even for popular representation, and in a satisfying progress towards the establishment of so-called parliamentary democracy.

There is, however, another eighteenth century story, much more marked in contemporary sources, and to my mind more revealing of characteristic eighteenth century attitudes. 'Improvement', the contemporary watchword for a huge agenda of social, commercial and moral objectives, was emphatically a prime concern of Parliament throughout the period. It expressed itself in a vast mass of particularist legislation, seemingly remote from the rationality of Enlightenment governments at the time, or democratic movements later on, yet in many ways far more effective at breaking down traditional structures.

The kind of legislation that eighteenth century Parliaments engaged in most commonly is the kind that historians often ignore. It is said, for example, that these Parliaments were notably reluctant to extend the governing class in line with social change, and that it was left until well into the nineteenth century for reformers to remodel the nation's institutions. We think of the House of Commons as being overwhelmingly composed of landowning squires or alternatively of courtiers and palacemen whose main aim was electoral control and corruption.

Yet the truth is that Parliament repeatedly engaged in remodelling of this kind, only in an *ad hoc* fashion, responding to the requirements of particular localities without fuss or resort to grand constitutional principles. I calculate that in a typical session, say in the 1770s and 1780s, it would pass at least a dozen acts which significantly affected the make-up of the ruling class.

The purposes of these acts were diverse. Some had to do with urban improvement, as we would call it, some with the physical restructuring of towns and cities engulfed by economic change; others with the building and maintaining of roads and canals, bridges and harbours; others with social regulations, notably the provision of poor relief; others with legal and judicial matters, including the building of gaols, or the establishment of new forms of jurisdiction in debt cases; others with the collection of local taxes.

There were certain crucial features of this process. Firstly, these purposes, often seemingly rather minor, actually concerned extremely important matters. It was legislation of this kind that built the infrastructure of a rapidly modernising and industrialising country, both physically and metaphorically. The scale should not deceive us. If we put together all the local acts that changed the administration of the Poor Laws, for instance, and lumped them together as one composite piece of legislation the result would look at least as impressive as a major piece of nineteenth or twentieth century social legislation. The fact that in the eighteenth century these things were done piecemeal should not deceive us into supposing that substantial change was not taking place.

Secondly, this kind of legislation was precisely the kind that most interested the social levels immediately below those of the so-called aristocratic and landed classes. A great deal of this legislation was designed to suit the demands either of the mercantile and trading elite of London and other towns, or even, of what was later called the shopocracy, the lower middle class of Georgian society. Moreover these people were in effect enfranchised by this legislation. The administrative bodies created to establish and manage the concerns I have briefly described were defined by property qualifications in most cases. These qualifications were not those associated with landownership but with small, usually urban property. Because eighteenth century Parliaments left the reform of the municipalities to the following century, it is easy to assume that they were uninterested in urban government. The truth is that they dramatically restructured it, by adding numerous bodies of relatively humble citizens.

Thirdly, and no less important, government had surprisingly little to do with this process. Parliament passed enormous quantities of commercial legislation in the eighteenth century, as well as the kind of statutes that I have been talking about here. Government generally got interested in such matters only insofar as there were implications for its finance. A very high proportion of such legislation whether it was concerned with overseas trade or domestic regulation resulted from direct action by Parliament itself in response to the demands of specific interest groups. Moreover the legal

legislation took place almost without interference from central government. Institutions that had involved such interference in earlier periods withered or disappeared. The Privy Council ceased to take an interests in such matters. The Crown itself ostentatiously avoided the kind of directions to local elites in both town and country that it had regarded as standard a century earlier. All this had the effect of making the legislature extraordinarily responsive to the community at large, a very peculiar phenomenon by Continental standards.

I know of no European parallel for this process, which gave the commercial bourgeoisie, for want of a better term, a means of implementing its projects and establishing its power without the necessity for political violence or even overt challenge to the landed elite. German visitors to Britain at the end of the eighteenth century were startled by this phenomenon. They found it very difficult to grasp how such change could have been carried through without armies of bureaucrats and draconian state action. The idea that a parliamentary system could go with the creation of a vast empire overseas and economic transformation at home was almost inconceivable to people brought up to associate change with central planning.

2. Britain was believed to have much the most tolerant and accessible literary and political culture of the day. The current tendency, which closely follows the work of the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas, is to make this merely the leading edge of a general cultural phenomenon, the creation of what he calls a bourgeois 'public sphere'. From the vantage point of today this may make sense. But the fact is that the eighteenth century thought the gap between Britain and other societies was enormous in this respect. I think this was partly a matter of degree. That is to say, the press and the purveyors of print did enjoy a relative freedom of expression that was not matched elsewhere until much later. But it is also a matter of kind. The English tradition of voluntary association, of communal response rather than state instruction, gave a practical dimension to 'freedom of speech' and 'toleration' that looked very distinctive to foreign eyes. The way in which this affected economic development is a matter for detailed consideration. But its relevance to the development both of mass consumerism and technical education/innovation provides obvious examples.

Take something that is vital to the Habermas thesis; the proliferation of newspapers. This looks like a European-wide development, genuinely a product of new Western patterns of self-expression and mass engagement. But there are major differences between the press in Britain and those of other societies. On the Continent the periodical press was subject to extremely close censorship. Notably this was the case in Bourbon France.

Recent historians have claimed to see a powerful liberal movement expressing itself in the French media at this time. Yet it could do so only in a highly covert and coded form. The same was true in Germany, where even to engage in political debate except in the most abstract terms was highly controversial and dangerous. When foreigners came to Britain they were staggered by the freedom with which newspapers discussed not merely political principles and government measures, but the personal lives and activities both of the royal family and of politicians. When they saw the freedom with which cartoonists libeled and lambasted their governors, they were even more astonished. There was no other country in Europe in which such robust criticism could be attempted, let alone carried out. By a curious paradox, this British experience did have an important influence on the Continent, somewhat unintentionally. Continental states closely censored discussion of their own concerns. But they tended not to censor discussion of what went on elsewhere. Britain's free press enjoyed great popularity on the Continent either in the form of international gazettes which drew their material from diverse countries, or in the forms of extracts and abstracts that were printed by local newspapers from Naples to Stockholm and Warsaw to Lisbon. The result was that all kinds of ideas being discussed in Britain at a time of acute controversy, during the American Revolution, for example, did get into the Continental mainstream. Continental monarchs like Joseph II took pleasure in the discomfiture of the British government that lost the American colonies, without appreciating the ideological contamination that this brought with it.

Moreover the readership in France, Germany and Italy was extremely restricted. It often consisted of academics and bureaucrats, people who had a vested interest in state structures and whose real contact with other classes was often quite restricted. Time and again foreigners were impressed by the interest of literate but extremely humble Englishmen in matters that seemed far above their heads in continental terms. The tradition of popular politics that made English government a matter of the most acute concern to all classes remained a vital one in the eighteenth century. Habermas speaks of a coffee house culture, a seemingly unified form of bourgeois discourse that united European societies in a newly engaged degree of political activity. This was not the way that contemporary travellers saw them. They generally found Continental coffee houses places of primarily social recreation, or in the case of Germany, rather solemn intellectual debate of a rarified kind. In Britain they found quite different places, often somewhat unsociable and gloomy, but characterised by much reading and discussion of newspapers, and by a striking preoccupation of a very English kind with the activities of

governments and the liberties of the free-born Englishmen. In the masculine world of the club, whether in its humble tavern variety or in the elevated world of the West End gentleman's club, we find a form of association that seemed perfectly to encapsulate the essentially serious, politicised concerns of the English male. The contrast especially with the articulate and attractive but politically impotent salon culture of Paris was much commented on. Moreover, the fact that club-like association seemed to go naturally with the capacity of English businessmen to combine for the purposes both of commercial and industrial enterprise on the one hand, and for the purposes of lobbying, pressurising and generally exploiting Parliament as a source of support on the other, did not go without notice. Nor did it pass unnoticed that such people were extremely adroit at utilising the Press for purposes of organisation and propaganda.

There is, as a result, a vigorous, even vulgar quality to the popular Press in Britain at this time that is quite without counterpart elsewhere. I do not mean that Continental cultures lacked a powerful plebeian tradition; quite the contrary. But a major difference does seem to have been that these traditions expressed themselves in a separate sphere from the relatively polite discourse of elites. In Britain there was a genuinely shared cultural medium, dominated but not monopolised by political debate, that brought virtually all classes together.

3. It was considered, until the 1790s at least, that Britain had the most open society of the period. At numerous times since, this has seemed difficult to credit. But the fact that contemporaries considered it so egalitarian cannot be gainsaid. This is not a crude matter of whether it was easier in Britain than elsewhere for a commoner to obtain nobility, or easier for a bourgeois to get a bishopric. (Perhaps neither was true). Rather it was believed to be a question of the extent to which the elite mixed with its inferiors, its readiness to engage in techniques of leadership rather than dictatorship, its engagement in moral causes that came from below, its commitment to the cult of 'improvement' in the widest sense. Economic historians continue to argue about the implications for British modernisation of its genteel culture. Eighteenth century observers seem to have had no doubt that it provided an intensely flexible and favourable framework for change and growth.

Is this at all plausible? It seems unlikely. Today we continue to accept that Britain has been unusually kind to aristocratic people and values since the eighteenth century, certainly by comparison with more revolutionary societies on the Continent and more egalitarian societies in the New World. And, when we try to visualise the culture of the eighteenth century, with the physical remains of the period to remind us, it is easy to think of the

Palladian palaces that still litter the English landscape or of Austen novels packed with lords and ladies seemingly absorbing the fascination and obtaining the allegiance of middle-class readers. But there were changes in the position of eighteenth century aristocrats as perceived by contemporaries, that do seem to me to modify this picture.

Firstly foreign observers were genuinely struck by the relative insignificance of class in England. On the streets of London no respect or deference was shown to men and women of rank, on the contrary. But in Berlin, Rome and Paris, the ordinary bystander who did not give way to let a nobleman pass was likely to find himself thrown in the gutter or whipped by a flunkey. In an English assembly room or an English club there was no demarcation, formal or informal, between men of birth and ordinary bourgeois, a demarcation that was observed throughout the rest of Europe. And above all, in matters of taxation a title made no difference whatever. French visitors were astonished to find that on the toll roads of England a carriage bearing the arms of a nobleman was not exempt from paying toll. In fact the absence of legal privileges generally was very marked. The results were particularly important for the younger children of noble houses. The sons and daughters of an English peer were mere commoners. Virtually all European aristocracies treated all members of an ennobled family as equally entitled to the respect of nobility. Even royalty in Britain seemed to be treated with remarkable freedom. The well-born Continental émigrés who fled to Britain as a result of the French Revolution were baffled in English society when they found commoners hobnobbing with an English prince of the blood. This was indeed literally the case. In the clubs of London's West End royal princes such as the Duke of York and the Duke of Cumberland were treated precisely as if they were no better than ordinary English gentlemen. In other European courts they would have been utterly unapproachable except on their own terms and according to a crushing royal etiquette. All this gave a unique flavour to the life of the British elite. Now, of course, none of this means that by the standards of a modern democracy this was an egalitarian society, nor does it mean at all that great wealth did not confer great practical advantages. But it did mean that the consciousness or perception of equality, which matters a great deal in terms of its psychological impact on the ambitious and talented, on those determined to improve their status and wealth, was quite marked by comparison with other States in which awareness of the gap between the commoner and nobleman was plainly very high.

Nor was this a matter of individual perceptions. There was an entire rhetoric in place by the late eighteenth century that made English aristocracy

the servant of society rather than its master. This was often highly hypocritical of course, and might even be very misleading; but again it was the resulting perception that counted for much. Whatever their defects parliamentary elections, for example, were pretty rumbustious, open affairs that forced men and indeed women of rank and status to abase themselves before men of neither. The famous election of 1784 in which the Duchess of Devonshire was to be seen bestowing her embraces on Westminster porters and carters fascinated foreign opinion and became a kind of emblem of English classlessness. In what other country could such a scene have occurred? Or what of the way aristocratic malefactors were treated in Britain? Lord Ferrers, a peer of the realm, was prosecuted, tried and executed for murdering his servant in 1760. Today I suspect that he would have been incarcerated as a lunatic. At the time, in any other country, it was believed that he would not have been proceeded against at all. Yet such was the sensitivity on the subject of legal equality in Britain and such the interest in the trial that there was no trial or pardoning Ferrers. Prints of his execution were published in England and transmitted all over Europe as proof of the extraordinary evenhandedness of English justice. And finally, what of the kinds of power that late eighteenth century aristocrats had to exercise. Very rarely could it be described as autocratic. New forms of political organisation in this period tended to be of the open subscription kind. It involved ordinary citizens subscribing to a legal institution, often with philanthropic aims, on the basis that they would be permitted a full share in its management. Aristocrats who involved themselves in these organisations with a view to influence, power and patronage, found that they were dependent on their powers of persuasion, not their inherited privileges or rights. The typical nobleman of the seventeenth century would have expected to find himself at the head of his fellow citizens and to be an accepted if not unquestioned commander. The nobleman of the eighteenth century found himself increasingly having to be patron or president of a self-governing body. To be Lord Lieutenant of a country might have been the highest ambition of a seventeenth century nobleman, a position that gave him genuine power. His successor had to aim at being President of a country hospital, chairman of a committee which made him no more than first among equals.

There was also another kind of change, a more subtle question of public attitude. There is a distinct shift in public morality in the last quarter of the century, affecting all kinds of traditional excess, from whoring and drinking to gaming and duelling. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this was the changing character of the court. George III and his Queen Sophia Charlotte had a reputation for piety and moral conformity quite unlike that of earlier

monarchs. This placed further pressure on the nobility. By the 1780s and 1790s, it was becoming difficult for aristocracy to engage in the kind of irresponsible behaviour that involved flouting commonly accepted standards. The volume of propaganda to the effect that noblemen must be seen to adopting high standards of public and moral conduct is a feature of the last decades of the century. This did not mean that they behaved any better, necessarily. What it meant was that such behaviour had to be concealed or disciplined for purposes of public consumption.

Paradoxically it was precisely this kind of public taming of the English aristocracy that permitted its survival in an age of revolution. Like much else in British society, it modernised by degrees, accommodating itself to change, rather than forcing a confrontation with forces of change. Aristocracies that took the other route, in France most notoriously, suffered a very different fate. I do not think any of this was inevitable. There was plenty of anti-aristocratic feeling in eighteenth century Britain, some of it expressed in radical movements like the Wilkesites, much of it less public but nonetheless potent. In the 1790s there was acute apprehension with the British elite and a strong sense that its leadership had to be justified in terms that would appeal to the nation as a whole. Modern study of the trauma of this period concentrates much on the possibility of authentically popular revolt, of an English *sans-culloterie*. But, of course, what really mattered was the attitude of the English middle-class, the class that sustained the colossal tax burden of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, maintained effective control of its employees and servants, and that had the muscle to overthrow the existing political and social system. Convincing such people that they were ultimately in the same boat as their betters and that their betters were happy to share it with them was quite crucial to aristocratic survival.

Two final points. The emphasis I would want to give contemporary opinion is not meant to reintroduce Whiggism by the back door. What one thinks of a self-consciously commercial culture, warts and all, or nothing but warts, is a matter of judgment not analysis. Foreigners, especially Anglomaniacs, often ignored the warts altogether. But they surely had a point when they thought Britain had proceeded much further down the road of Western development than its competitors.

Lastly, this kind of modernity does not have to fit all prescriptions for modernity. There are numerous features of the mentality of the late eighteenth century that would have embarrassed Voltaire, one of the first publicists of British progress. These include a repressive Evangelical morality, a drift to authoritarian loyalism and chauvinism, not necessarily much reduced by the Radicalism of the 1820s and 1830s, and resistance to

the natural rights version of libertarian thought that was one of the obvious legacies of Enlightenment thought and Revolutionary politics. The forces of enterprise which flourished in Britain's eighteenth century environment were, after all, able to use their much admired freedom to adopt a traditionally English view of their privileges and priorities. It used to be a standard axiom of Marxist thought that a capitalist bourgeoisie turned to political liberalism to express its power against feudal obscurantism. This whole way of thinking is now so exploded that it hardly bears discussion, perhaps, but it is worth remembering that in the first industrial nation there existed a high degree of collaboration between the old and the new, a socially conservative kind of libertarianism that looks peculiar by European standards, and an eccentrically English rejection of self-consciously secular innovation.