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## Industrial Effetes

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

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**W**hen Harold Abrahams, the real life hero of *Chariots of Fire*, realizes that his dream of becoming the world's fastest runner will require the help of a professional trainer, he hires one and deeply offends the masters of Caius and Trinity Colleges who serve in the movie as the embodiment of the upper class that Abrahams wishes to overawe with his running. The Cambridge masters invite him to dinner in order to convey their disapproval. Ensnared in the handsome master's dining room, elegantly attired for the formal meal, they impart their disquiet at his breach of the gentleman's code of athletic competition. Not at all compliant, Abrahams spiritedly defends his resort to expert coaching. "Would you like me to play the gentleman and lose?" he demands. "Better to playing the tradesman," the Master of Trinity fires back. Abruptly getting up from the table, Abrahams closes the scene with a speech that puts the dispute in its historical context. "Gentlemen, you wish victory achieved with the apparent effortlessness of gods. I believe in excellence and I'll carry the future with me." Since Abrahams goes on to win the 100 meter dash at the 1924 Paris Olympics in splendid triumph, the audience is left to conclude that he understood the world in the making while his donnish critics clung to an outworn creed. "Not so," says Martin Wiener, or so we can infer from his new book, which examines how the gentlemen scholars of Oxford and Cambridge have continued to shape English values despite challenges from such determined outsiders as Harold Abrahams.

As the bulging receipts from *Chariots of Fire* indicate, the subject of individual motivation fascinates us in this season of depression fears. Why some people want to win races can substitute for why others do (or don't) work hard,

defer pleasure, save money, and take risks. No longer willing to take economic rationalism for granted, scholars such as Wiener have turned to cultural influences in their studies of economic decline. Truths about the universal propensity to truck and barter that were used to explain market relations in the palmy days of growth are fragmenting into the puzzles of particular preferences in the new era of limitations. Thus *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* offers more than a case study of one nation's resistance to the productive ideal; it marks a new strategy for analyzing the nexus between social norms and economic decisions.

It is Wiener's specific purpose to demonstrate that the contemporary problems of Great Britain can best be understood as the consequence of a pervasive dislike of industrial capitalism in the very nation that brought it into being. Looking at the past 130 years of English history, he argues that Margaret Thatcher will have to change more than monetary policies to move her country out of the economic doldrums, for the attitudes that blew the economy off course a century ago still prevail.

Although cast as the story of a failure, Wiener's study actually documents a success—that of the English upper class in preventing the leaders of the industrial revolution from turning their economic prowess into social and political power. His account begins with a dramatic reversal: having astounded the world with power looms, spinning jennies, steam engines, and iron horses, the English, Wiener says, recoiled from what they had wrought. The Great Exhibition mounted in the Crystal Palace in 1851 to celebrate the new age of technology actually represented a turning point. After that schoolmasters, scholars, statesmen, and social critics took alarm at the spiritual cost of material progress and embarked on a campaign to save the English from their own inventiveness. Instead of embracing their obvious destiny as the world's modernizers, educated Englishmen conspired to contain economic development at home. In this effort they were aided by the nation's aristocratic rulers who were bent on getting the manufacturing tyros to give up their money-grubbing ways. Together they fashioned an image of England as the world's civilizer and invented the concept of the gentleman “to keep the middle classes in order,” as Bertrand Russell described it. Meeting words with deeds they lambasted the marketplace and lampooned the self-made man. Words narrating the past glories of the English, words rhapsodizing on rustic virtues, words excoriating the crassness of commerce rolled off the newly perfected rotary presses. Repeated over four generations this attack on modernity congealed into an inveterate national hostility to the leitmotifs of progress: innovation, competition, and efficiency. To this cultural about-face Wiener attributes the English economy's present lackluster performance.

The crucial institution in the long, wordy struggle against commercial mores was the English public school. From this redoubt the critics of industrial society

sent forth streams of carefully cultivated crusaders. Two royal commissions created in the 1860s to study the need for modernizing the endowed schools ended up making them models for all preparatory education. Explicitly endorsing the goal of molding the character of English gentlemen, the commissioners extolled as well the virtues of a classical curriculum. Studying the literature of the ancients, they claimed, would refine the intellect, perfect the prose, and instill the morals needed by a cadre of civilizers. Instruction in the natural sciences was to be tolerated only if it did not take time away from the venerable quadrivium. So completely did the public schools dominate the life of the mind in England that science could scarcely get a foothold in the universities. Quoting from T.H. Huxley's testimony before a parliamentary committee in 1868, Wiener recounts the story of an Oxford dinner party in which the guests were asked if it would be fair to say that someone might have taken the highest honors there without ever having heard that the earth went round the sun to which all present replied, "yes." So implacably opposed to any course of study with practical implications were the schoolmasters of England that utility actually became a source of opprobrium. Parochial without being local, the public schools successfully imposed a uniform standard of gentility upon the nation. The manners learned, the friendships formed, the prejudices acquired at a Harrow or Eton became necessary adjuncts to any career. Even England's industrial leaders, from Isambard Brunel, England's first great engineering genius, to Marcus Samuel, the creator of Shell Oil, sent their sons to public schools that taught them, among other things, to despise the world of their fathers.

The opponents of the spirit of industry found in rural England the perfect foil for the wretched cities of the industrial North. Since the capitalist practices of both landlords and factory owners had emptied the countryside of contentious tenants and poverty-stricken cottagers, a bucolic setting lay ready at hand to symbolize all that was enduringly satisfying. Only outside the smoky pale of manufacturing towns could one find the serenity and beauty that was truly England. Leaving the world of objects to the captains of industry, the foes of economic progress seized the goods of the spirit—the images and ideas through which a people come to understand their shared experience. Alerted to the disruptive force of commerce, successive generations of English writers kept alive the nation's identity with Blake's "green and pleasant land." From Mill, Arnold, Dickens, and Ruskin; to Toynbee, Tawney, and Morris; to Priestley, Schumacher, and Betjeman, poets and scholars entered the lists against the more and bigger mentality of the modernizers. Inventiveness was recast as love of gadgetry, systematic efficiency as a soul-numbing repetitiousness, progress as a shibboleth for the mindless pursuit of novelty. Affecting everything from architecture to broadcasting the campaign to rebottle the genie of industry finally reached the campus of the politicians. By the twentieth century both Conservative and Labor party

leaders were ready to forswear free trade and empire in order to restrain the dynamic of growth.

Having described so well the pervasive English contempt for the boisterous virtues of business, Wiener sets himself something of a task to explain how the big bang of industrial creation occurred in the first place. His answer lies in the aristocracy's capacity for accommodation. Because they had already been converted to the profit motive in the management of their estates, they appreciated the inventive genius that was transforming English manufacturing. Indeed their own enhancement of agricultural yields had created the necessary conditions for an industrial take-off. Prosperous and confident in a capitalistic world, they were willing to tolerate the industrialists as long as their right to rule went unchallenged. Isolated in the North, the Bible-reading autodidacts of England's factory towns were cut off from the nerve center of the body politic in London. The aristocratic leaders were therefore able to set their own pace for extending political power to the new men, and they used the extra time to polish the rough diamonds of industry. Thus were the natural spokesmen for modernization—and their heirs—weaned away from an earlier enthusiasm for economic progress. When the northern parvenues had been safely encapsulated within the conceptual order of the aristocrats and intellectuals, an enlarged and culturally homogenous ruling class was ready to monitor the whole nation's encounter with money, machines, and the market. Industry continued to feed and clothe the people, but a sentimental *cordon sanitaire* had been thrown up to halt the spread of its meretricious values.

Letting the verbal brilliance of his English witnesses make his case for him, Wiener confines the discussion of purely material factors in British retardation to an appendix on the limits of economic explanations. His abundant quotations provide stunning proof of the English command of their language while his argument suggests what that might mean in a land where the right word still holds a cutting edge. His assemblage of marvelous anecdotes also demonstrates what real class barriers are. How bland in contrast appear those American claims to a class system based on correlations between family income and social mobility to which college freshmen are exposed because of *their* schoolmasters' creed. Getting a feel for the meaning of English economic decline is more difficult. In point of fact, during the century for which Wiener has documented the antipathy to material progress, England's gross national product grew unabatingly with the greatest rise in living standards attained (and attained) in the 1970s. What England has actually experienced is a relative decline. Once commercially preeminent, the English have had to watch a succession of competitors pass them by. But even this has become a source of wry amusement as they have seen other displaced frontrunners such as the United States join them on the sidelines. Rather than a decline in income, the English have suffered a decline in productivity. The

refrigerator the Danes can produce in two days takes five in a British factory. But if, as Wiener and his reviewers maintain, English national pride is more closely tied to the achievement of civility than the assembling of appliances, where is the sting? Unless the malaise is in the culture itself and not in its economic consequences, a possibility that I would like to explore.

No small part of the rhetorical force of Wiener's argument comes from his exploiting our sense that there is something untoward about the English rejection of the industrial spirit. Their refractory behavior seems downright puzzling—as though an acrobat somersaulting through the air should all of a sudden go limp. Here are the English flinging railroads across the land, plunging deeper and deeper into the earth's bowels for mineral treasures, setting hundreds of spindles dancing to the steampiper's tune. New vistas of material wealth open up; new heights of inventiveness are reached. But no resonating ideology emerges to celebrate these triumphs or forge a new national identity. Successive waves of transforming technologies break over the country, leaving behind gasoline engines, electricity, synthetics, and computers, but still no corresponding revolution in values. The material base of the society—the ways of work, the location of wealth, the rates of population growth, the distribution of commodities—is totally restructured while the goods of the mind—the cherished goals, the imagined past, the aesthetic preferences, the moral convictions—remain firmly rooted in the preindustrial era. English history becomes an anomaly. Clearly figuring in this judgment, however, is our own assumption that structural change will produce compatible cultural responses. We expect congruence between social systems and cultural values, perhaps summoning to our mind those patterned variables we learned in sociology. Traditional society with its patriarchal authority, inherited status, geographic mobility, and functionally diverse work is arrayed against modern society with its participatory politics, earned status, and specialized tasks.

The theory behind this expectation is Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism, a conceptual tool of great power that made values the linchpin connecting the subjective world of each social member to the objective systems that composed social living. Ideology, in Parsonian sociology, shed its Marxist stigma as false consciousness and became instead that complex of shared beliefs that made coherent social action possible. Recast as a kind of social cement, ideology no longer appeared as a class weapon, but rather as a collective response to structural changes permeating the consciousness of all. By successfully documenting the arrest of the spirit of industry in the homeland of industrial society, Wiener has struck a blow at structural-functionalism far more devastating than his explicit attack on economic theories. Indeed, with the profoundly traditional Japa-

nese becoming the industrial giants of the late twentieth century, only the history of the United States remains to validate the presumably universal modernization process. Wiener, however, has not abandoned the structural-functionalist concept of culture with its assumption that ideas are the invisible, but efficient, mediators between social purposes and practices. And this flaws an otherwise stellar academic performance.

An alternative and, I think, more accurate interpretation of English history would emphasize the continuity of upper-class resistance to social change. There is little evidence that the industrial spirit ever acquired a place in English culture from which it might be said to have declined. The traditional rulers of England were as much the arbiters of public taste in the half-century before the Great Exhibition as they were afterwards. More to the point, they were firmly in possession of political power and used it ruthlessly between the time of the American Revolution and Napoleon's defeat to stamp out all reform groups. The critics of aristocratic rule who formed various radical associations in London, Birmingham, and Manchester were harassed by threats of sedition when they were not actually arrested or hounded out of the country. Equally conspicuous in the first half of the nineteenth century were the panegyrics to rural life in the writings of Cobbett and Disraeli. The nation's receptivity to capitalism during the early modern centuries of agricultural and mercantile expansion, which Wiener quite rightly connects with England's pioneering role in industry, has been traced by Alan Macfarlane back to the fourteenth century. The men who integrated the machinery in the first textile mills had been prefigured by those who organized coal mining in the sixteenth, convertible husbandry in the seventeenth, and calico printing and china making in the eighteenth. If the upper class invented the concept of gentleman to keep the middle class in order, as Russell quipped, they did so long before Arkwright and Watt, for the social mobility studied by Lawrence Stone for the Elizabethan age and Geoffrey Holmes for Augustan England ended up in the same process of gentrification.<sup>1</sup>

To tell the story of the enduring domination of a closely guarded elite instead of Wiener's suspenseful tale of the blocking of a rising bourgeoisie makes much more salient the role of class power in English history. As Perry Anderson has argued, the eighteenth-century constitutional reform movement was easily beaten back by England's traditional rulers because members of the middle class were traumatized by the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Themselves excluded from political

<sup>1</sup> Stone, "Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700," *Past and Present* 33 (1966); and Holmes, "The Professions and Social Change in England, 1680-1730," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979).

<sup>2</sup> *New Left Review*, July-August 1968.

power, they took cover with their social superiors once the radicalism of the French mobs became clear. Thereafter the English government yielded to reformers only when the hissing of the safety valve announced that the time had finally come. Within this political context, the success of a high-brow campaign to politicize gentility is not so surprising. What is less obvious is the impact of this rhetorical war upon the economic decline it is supposed to have caused. Wiener leaves it to his readers to supply the intervening variables. We must make the connection between antipathy to hard work, efficiency, competitive striving, and innovative boldness, on the one hand, and missed opportunities, lackadaisical management, and the general censure of pushy profit-making, on the other. Our assumptions about the operation of values in social action supply the causes.

*English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* has little to say about the working class or even that sizeable middle class outside the charmed circle of Oxbridge-educated gentle persons. Wiener dismisses the idea that trade union "obstructionism" is a cause of declining productivity by asserting that the elite enjoys a disproportionate influence upon public opinion. If not exactly a non sequitur, this statement does less than justice to the contributions to economic development made by men of obscure origins.<sup>3</sup> The antibusiness snobbery instilled in public schools cannot explain why ambitious outsiders with no other incentive than that of making money were unable to take advantage of the room at the top caused by the disdain drain. The history of entrepreneurship after all is one of "creative destruction," to use Schumpeter's expression. Rarely has that destructive force come from those who have already succeeded, however recently. Innovation comes from new men and flourishes in those societies where the already-established cannot cut off access to opportunity.

In the developments within industrial capitalism over the past century we can locate some of the means for beating back challenges from below. The increased capitalization in machinery led to concentrations of wealth and a very high cost of entry into production. Both undercut the effectiveness of competition that Adam Smith had counted on to mediate between individual self-interest and the social benefit of improvements. These structural changes within the economy greatly facilitated the meshing of economic and political power in England as elsewhere. The cult of civility no doubt supplied a gloss on all this, but England's ruling class has not been loath to exercise class power directly. It is this dimension of the problem that is obscured when Wiener justifies neglecting popular culture on the grounds that the values of the elite permeate the whole society

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting in this connection that a recent Gallup survey of European and American values, reported in the *London Times*, June 11, 1982, p. 12, revealed the English and Americans much closer together than either with Europeans in their unusual pride in work.

because of its disproportionate influence. Influence is clearly not the only force at work. Peter Sellers once put his considerable talents as a mimic to use by taping a series of telephone calls of himself imitating job-hunters. Sellers as a Pakistani followed Sellers, the cockney, then Sellers with the intonations of the man on the Clapham bus, and finally Sellers with an impeccable "U" accent. The reactions of prospective employers were all too predictable and point to a critical distinction about culture and social control: to shape opinions about what is genteel is not the same thing as using power to circumscribe the lives of those who do not possess gentility. Shaw's verbal class-distinction does more than pander to social prejudices, it functions as part of the economic structure.

Wiener has boldly carried the case for culture into the well-fortified turf of economic analysis. The critical acclaim for *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* will properly be hailed as a triumph for the "wets" of *mentalité* studies over the "dries" of data collection. With bookies and mediums enjoying better prediction rates than business forecasters it is no wonder that readers are receptive to arguments that embrace the untidy human perversities excluded from mathematical modeling. The culture concept, however, is freighted with its own ideological baggage that should be unpacked. To assume that the values of ordinary people are created by elites is to exaggerate the control that exists over the contents of other people's minds and suggests that the lower classes voluntarily participate in their own oppression. While not exactly exonerated, the use of class power is thus sanitized. The danger in a book as persuasive as Wiener's is not that economic factors will be underestimated in our accounts of social change, but rather that the exercise of class power will be overlooked and we will end up with yet another intellectual strategy for blaming the powerlessness of the poor upon themselves.