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**Reconstructing the Industrial Revolution:
Analyses, Perceptions and Conceptions
Of Britain's Precocious Transition to
Europe's First Industrial Society**

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Summary

The Industrial Revolution continues to be analysed by economic historians deploying the conceptual vocabularies of modern social science, particularly economics. Their approach which gives priority to the elaboration of causes and processes of evolution is far too often and superficially contrasted with post-modern forms of social and cultural history with their aspirations to recover the meanings of the Revolution for those who lived through its turmoil and for 'witnesses' from the mainland who visited the offshore economy between 1815-48. Our purpose is to demonstrate how three distinct reconstructions of the Revolution are only apparently in conflict and above all that a contextualised analysis of observations of travellers from the mainland and the United States provides several clear insights into Britain's famous economic transformation.

Introduction

Eric Hobsbawm observed: 'words are witnesses which often speak louder than documents'.¹ Together with the French Revolution and the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution belongs to a restricted group of historical conjunctures that are famous. Many people continue to refer to The Industrial Revolution and have a rough idea of its meaning, chronological span and geographical boundaries. However, what seemed to be an unproblematical label has in the course of the last century become a battleground of much economic, social and, more recently, cultural history. Our essay will not aim to add to the analysis of the origins, causes, material significance, economic modernity or 'Britishness' of the Industrial Revolution. These questions frame an academic tradition of historical writing that gathers, calibrates and reconstitutes data and evidence from eight decades conventionally located between 1763 and

¹ Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, p. 17.

1846; a pre-selected period that is used to demarcate the conjuncture and to position England's famous revolution within a discourse shaped by the preoccupations and conceptual vocabularies of modern social science – particularly economics.

Instead, this article intends to expose and underline those features of England's economic development that were 'perceived' by contemporaries writing after the wars with France to mark both a decisive break with a pre-industrial past and to represent a portent of the future, not just for England, but for other countries, regions and cities on the mainland as well. Such a traditional historiography of the Industrial Revolution (reconstructed by historians on the basis of sources that include the responses and evaluations written by people alive at the time in the form of diaries, tours and reports that recognized England was undergoing rapid economic and social change that could be depicted as a 'discontinuity' with its past) has remained alive and well.² That tradition has always insisted that in its early stages (when industrialization continued to be spatially concentrated) political and social awareness of any fundamental and irreversible transformation remained confined and fragmented. Indeed for several decades, until the diffusion of industry and growth of towns attained a scale and visibility within England that became unavoidable, the majority of the kingdom's population, most of its aristocracy and governing elite and a list of famous intellectuals (including Austen, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Burke, as well as Smith, Malthus, Ricardo and several other classical economists) seemed unaware of their times as an era of transition towards a 'modern' world.³

² For a collection of unpublished primary sources see Gard, *Observant Traveller*.

³ Thomis, *Responses to Industrialization*, pp. 7-33. Only a few contemporary diaries seem at all concerned with the issue of industrialization. See Batts, *British Manuscript Diaries*.

The 'testimonies' of Britons who lived through the Industrial Revolution have been carefully examined by various historians in recent years and will be considered here only in their totality. The same degree of attention has not been attributed to the diaries, travelogues and reports written by American, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish and Swiss travellers who toured England and Scotland at various stages of the Industrial Revolution and who commented - more or less perceptively, but usually unfavourably - on the transformation that they witnessed at first hand.⁴ Their direct observations can, moreover, be supplemented by analyses from other more famous intellectuals like Hegel and Tocqueville who kept themselves informed about developments in England by elaborating and mediating on books and newspaper articles by their English and European contemporaries.⁵ Foreign perceptions and observations include insightful perspectives that are less rooted in English history and culture, and seem more aware of a 'new' type of economy and society emerging on Europe's off-shore island.⁶ They display pertinent anxieties about how both the beneficial and undesirable features of 'industrialization' might foster the development or afflict the stability and welfare of their own societies.

⁴ This article is built upon a systematic analysis of foreign travellers' diaries dating from the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the 1851 Great Exhibition. References will be made to eighteenth-century travellers who clearly commented on similar aspects, but did not show any clear sense of British exceptionalism. General collections of extracts from foreigners' diaries and *memoires* for the period considered include: Smith, *Foreign Visitors in England*; Roe, *French Travellers*; Jones, *Voyageurs Français*; Bain, *Voyageurs Français*; Ballam and Lewis, *Visitor's Book*; Wilson, *Strange Island*; Palmer, *French Travellers*; Henderson, *Industrial Britain*; Burton and Burton, *Green Bag Travellers*; Trench, *Travellers in Britain*.

⁵ McClelland, *German Historians*, pp. 62-65.

⁶ Out of the c. 90 diaries and travelogues examined, c. 70 have been included here. Although our sample is clearly not sufficiently representative, it shows how most travellers were aware of the economic and social problems experienced by Britain at the time. They often visited industrial sites, mines, bridges, shipyards and engineering works.

Thus the sources and historiographies offer three overlapping but separable reconfigurations of the Industrial Revolution which we propose to differentiate by way of an analysis of their respective assumptions, contents and methodologies. Among most historians, the positivist representation of Britain's Industrial Revolution as revealed by economic historians through the vocabularies, taxonomies and theories of modern social science, is now regarded as partial and inadequate. Our paper attempts to deal with this post-modern critique emanating largely from new cultural history by comparing and contrasting three separate reconstructions of the Industrial Revolution. It does so by analysing the limitations, peculiarities and implicit 'agendas' of each reconstruction and by locating them against the background of continuing academic debates on the nature and epistemological purposes served by an evolving 'conception' of the First Industrial Revolution.

Modern Reconstructions Of The Industrial Revolution

Historians have debated the nature, extent and ramifications of the Industrial Revolution for more than a century. The volume of evidence unearthed from primary sources on economic and social change covering the period from the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 to the Revolutions of 1848 is awesome. The bibliography of secondary interpretations is built upon monographic research, at every conceivable level of disaggregation, and includes whole libraries of books and articles.⁷ No consensus has, or indeed could now emerge.⁸ The Industrial Revolution has been endlessly 'reconfigured', 'reconceptualized' and

⁷ Dauntton, *Progress and Poverty* provides an excellent bibliography.

⁸ Michael Fores defines the Industrial Revolution as a Whigish construction 'of great dramas unfolding'. Fores, 'Myth', p. 194. For a general survey of notion, nature and historiography of the Industrial Revolution see Cannadine, 'Present and the past' and Hoppit, 'Understanding the industrial revolution'.

‘deconstructed’ down the generations and so much so that a radical minority of iconoclasts are now recommending that the category or label be expunged from historical discourse. That predictable post-structuralist nihilism can, however, be laid to rest because large areas of economic and social change that contemporaries emphasized, deplored and praised have been reconstituted as validated historical evidence and interpretations.⁹ The discipline of economic and social history has represented the discontinuities, continuities and predictions for the future associated with the Industrial Revolution in modern conceptual vocabularies, but uses statistical trends and hindsight that were obviously not available to even the most percipient of English and foreign observers of the day.

Its more recent conceptions of the Industrial Revolution have entailed the rejection of traditional assumptions about the nature and speed of Britain’s economic upsurge. For more than a century before and after the Second World War (when Britain was clearly in relative decline) British historians proudly accepted the canonical status bestowed upon their nation’s First Industrial Revolution by the godfathers of social science (Tocqueville, St. Simon, List, Marx, Engels, Comte, Durkheim and Weber) and a long line of neo-classical economists including Jevons, Marshall, Hicks, Kindleberger, Rostow, Kuznets, North, Landes and other Americans in search of a mother country.¹⁰ The industrial market economy along with liberty, democracy and benign hegemony have long been perceived by ‘*les Anglo-Saxons*’ as their bequest to modern civilisation. Unfortunately for this myth, historical research has now all but

⁹ On the relationship between language, historical reality and discourse see Rollison, ‘Discourse and class struggle’, pp. 166-7.

¹⁰ O’Brien, ‘Reconstruction’.

demolished the notion of a 'British' Industrial Revolution as the 'bridge' from ancient economic and social regimes to the modern world.¹¹

Thus, although the convenience and venerable age of the label Industrial Revolution serves to guarantee its survival, the deployment of a British 'paradigm' to analyse the 'industrialization' or 'retardation' of 'follower countries' on the mainland or indeed elsewhere in Eurasia has been effectively 'disabled'. Few historians (and fewer social scientists) are now prepared to argue that currently measured levels of productivity and real incomes per capita achieved by advanced economies in Europe, North America, Australasia and Japan would be different were it not for an initial, precocious and trans-national process in world history that occurred on the British Isles between 1763 and 1848.¹² By recontextualizing and locating Britain as another industrialized region within the geographical space of Eurasia and a body of more rigorous, and econometrically tested theory, historians have effectively denationalized the First Industrial Revolution.¹³ In disaggregating Britain's macroeconomy into sectors, industries and firms evolving within a chronology going back a long time before the Great Exhibition of 1851, they have exposed fundamental continuities in technique and organization manifested by major sectors and industries (such as agriculture, construction, bricks, mining, shipbuilding, food processing and clothing and to a lesser extent by glass, furniture and metal goods) where technology and the organization of production remained stable – although not static – in the transition towards an 'industrial economy'.¹⁴ During the

¹¹ Mathias, *First Industrial Revolutions* provides a concise introduction and is the first of six volumes on the 'Nature of Industrialization'.

¹² O'Brien, 'Britishness'; van Zanden, 'Great Convergence'.

¹³ K. Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*.

¹⁴ The concepts of 'proto-industry' and 'industrious revolution' suggest a much longer chronology. Mendels, 'Proto-industrialization'; Coleman, 'Proto-industrialization'; Kriedte, Medick and Schlumbohm, 'Proto-industrialization revisited'. On the 'industrious revolution' see: De Vries, 'Industrial Revolution'. For a critique of the concept see: Clark and van der Werf, 'Work in progress?'

Industrial Revolution in numerous occupations the ratio of capital to labour, and the tools and technologies used to perform manual and skilled work, were similar to what they had been in Tudor times.¹⁵ Modes of production such as small-scale and family firms continued to thrive in symbiosis with factories, large-scale enterprises and corporations.¹⁶ The period of the Industrial Revolution was also characterized by the continued and widespread use in production and transportation of traditional forms of materials and energy such as wood, water, wind, animals and human toil, accompanied by celebrated, but still rather gradual diffusions of iron and steel and steam powered engines and machinery.¹⁷

Historians are adept at and even professionally disposed towards pinpointing survivals and antecedents. Modern accounts have emerged as the product of academic research, the reconfiguration of all revolutions in wider geographical spaces and longer temporal chronologies and the appearance of data and new theories concerned with economic and social change.¹⁸ Above all, they are the product of hindsight based upon our own preoccupations and imbued with questions and priorities of limited relevance and interest for the generations who lived through (or observed) this famous British event unfurl during those decades of recovery that succeeded the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which

¹⁵ Recent research has shown how these more 'traditional' sectors that have often been forgotten by the Industrial Revolution, were in reality highly dynamic in terms of product innovation and active response to changing consumer preferences. Styles, 'Product innovation'; and Snodin and Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts*, especially chapters 10 and 15.

¹⁶ Sabel and Zeitlin, 'Historical Alternatives'; Berg, 'Small producer capitalism'; *idem*, *Age of Manufactures*; Sabel and Zeitlin, *World of Possibilities*; Behagg, 'Mass Production'.

¹⁷ Von Tunzelmann, *Steam Power*; Pollard, *Peaceful Conquest*, p. 24; Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change*.

¹⁸ Cameron, 'Industrial Revolution', pp. 163-88; Mokyr, 'That which we call industrial revolution'; Temin, 'Two views'. See also the debate in the pages of the *Economic History Review* between Berg & Hudson and Crafts & Harley: Crafts and Harley, 'Output growth'; Berg and Hudson, 'Rehabilitating'; *idem*, 'Growth and Change'.

had ravaged nearly every country of Western Europe, except Britain. From their standpoint, 'modern' histories of the Industrial Revolution - however detached, rounded and theoretically sophisticated - could be read as providing little more than a useful background and corrective to views of British commentators and/or the first-hand impressions of travellers from the mainland who reflected upon economic and social changes as they proceeded on the offshore islands for some three decades after the Congress of Vienna. But what did people see? What sense could contemporaries make of Britain's precocious transition to an industrial society at the time? Above all, how can we, nearly two centuries later, locate their perceptions against the 'constructed' perspectives of social science, from our own vantage points at the beginning of another millennium?

Contemporary British Perceptions of Economic and Social change

It would be stretching available sources to the limits of credibility for a historian to conclude that very many people among the articulate and informed generation of Britons who lived through three to four decades, that followed the long wars against France, evidently appreciated that their economy and society was passing through a revolution of trans-national significance for the history of civilisation.¹⁹ In 1814 Patrick Colquhoun and shortly thereafter Robert Owen, displayed some sense that their society was being radically transformed into something that broke decisively with tradition.²⁰ Nevertheless the term Industrial Revolution seems to have become current first among French, Belgian and German observers such as Otto (1799), Chaptal (1819), de Launcy (1829), Lamartine (1836), Blanqui (1837), Briavoinnes (1839), Engels

¹⁹ Stafford, *Socialism, Radicalism, and Nostalgia*, p. 14.

²⁰ Colquhoun, *Treatise*; Owen, *Observations*; Claeys, *Machinery*, pp. 31, 35-47.

(1844), and Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). They used the label long before Toynbee, the Hammonds, the Webbs, and other English socialist intellectuals writing before the First World War, translated their readings (of the parliamentary enquiries, data, books, essays, pamphlets, newspaper articles and personal commentaries published during the period 1763-1848) into a history of cataclysmic change for the British working classes and then labelled that dark age pejoratively as 'The Industrial Revolution'.²¹

Britain's famous classical economists (Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, Senior, McCulloch and Mill) accorded very limited space in their writings to technological change and industrialization.²² Mainstream economics concentrated instead on problems of income distribution, the allocation of resources and the legal and institutional conditions for the operation of efficient markets. Another less famous strand of British economic writing (mercantilist in style and harking back to the political arithmeticians of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) continued, however, to appear during and after the war to document, measure and proclaim the ever increasing wealth, resources, progress and power of the nation. In hortatory books and essays, Lowe, Chalmers, Tooke, Baines, Ure, Babbage, Smiles, Martineau, McCulloch and Porter celebrated the 'Progress of the Nation' and its commercial, industrial and, above all, its technological lead over rivals on the mainland²³ – a celebration which came to a triumphalist climax in 1851, when Britain exhibited its economy as the 'Workshop of the World'.²⁴

Before the quarter of the century between 1848 and 1873 - now referred to as 'the Long Victorian Boom' or the 'Golden Age of Free

²¹ Coleman, *Myth*. On the early use of the term 'Industrial Revolution' see: Bezanson, 'Early use'; Tribe, *Genealogies*, pp. 101-20 and Landes, 'Fable'.

²² Bowditch and Ramsland, *Voices*, pp. 12-34, 49-81; Hardy, 'Conceptions', pp. 247-8; Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, pp. 372-81.

²³ Rostow, *Theorists of Economic Growth*, pp. 13-149.

Trade' - a sense of widespread irreversible change diffused very gradually. Whole swathes of the landscape (particularly in the South, East Anglia and most of Wales, Scotland and Ireland) remained 'unscarred', while the lives, work and incomes of most 'rural' populations were 'touched', but not yet penetrated, by industrialization.²⁵ That same sense of geographically confined, gradual and avoidable change seems to have remained present among Britain's ruling aristocracy, ecclesiastical establishment and literary elite, most of whom resided in the countryside, with seasons in London and Bath.²⁶ Of course, politicians knew something of industry but they attended more carefully, as their mercantilist forebears had done since 1688, to developments in overseas trade and to official data on exports and imports.²⁷ Furthermore - and before the first census of 1801 - a significant minority of educated opinion maintained that the nation's population was probably stagnant or even in decline.²⁸ But thereafter decennial censuses told central governments and local authorities that demographic increase had proceeded and continued to grow at rates which threatened to create unsustainable demands for poor relief. Worried, they may have taken some comfort from a small sample of political (not classical) economists who could see solutions to Malthusian problems in machinery, the slow diffusion of steam power and the truly astonishing, but hopefully exemplary, rise of Lancashire's cotton textile industry.²⁹ Even then most of the elite placed more hope in the capacity of the Empire to absorb England's surplus and potentially disorderly population.³⁰

²⁴ Davis, *Great Exhibition*, pp. 176-77, 186.

²⁵ Stewart, 'Meaning for Machines', p. 259.

²⁶ Porter, 'Visitors' Visions'. See also Howell, 'Prescott's Visit'.

²⁷ Evans, *Forging*, pp. 29-36; Spadafora, *Idea of Progress*, pp. 326-9.

²⁸ Johnston, *British Emigration Policy*, pp. 1-9. See also Eversley, 'Population'.

²⁹ Berg, *Machinery Question*, pp. 72-3.

³⁰ Gambles, *Protection and Politics*, pp. 167-68.

Before mid-century, educated and informed residents of an industrializing offshore economy could see and react only to parts of the process. They lacked a nationwide view, historical perspective and foresight. Their reactions to the events of their own times rarely display either comprehension or optimism. They seem marked instead by apprehension that the most visible, thoroughly investigated and widely discussed manifestations of change (machinery, factories and the rapid growth of towns and populations) represented departures and discontinuities of a deplorable and potentially dangerous kind.³¹ Of course, a more positive and optimistic stand of the English discourse on the future of the realm continued even during the cyclical downswings of the 1820's, 1830's and 1840's. Nevertheless, the weight of published commentary from those decades is so overwhelmingly pessimistic that for more than a century after Engels published the *Condition of the Working Classes in England* in 1845, social historians (particularly those ideologically and politically inclined to oppose the capitalist system) experienced no difficulty in constructing a case, based upon a wealth of contemporary details, observations, reports, books and essays as well as the empathies portrayed in the novels, poems and plays of the day, which represented the Industrial Revolution as a period of almost unmitigated deterioration and degradation for the generations who lived through its early stages.³²

Thus, and almost at the start of the transition, the words of Southey, England's poet laureate, anticipated whole libraries of contemporary responses to industrialization: 'the immediate and whole effect of the manufacturing systems', he opined '... is to produce physical and moral

³¹ Webb, *From Custom to Capital*, p. 33; Raven, *Judging New Wealth*, pp. 233-4.

³² Thomis, *Responses to Industrialization*, pp. 164-6; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, pp. 3-19; Gray, *Factory Question*, pp. 48-58.

evil, in proportion to the wealth it creates'.³³ The 'physical' evils that Southey had in view, as early as 1819, included the 'filthy', 'squalid', 'polluted', 'unhealthy' and 'ugly' built environments of the new industrial towns that housed and contained the workforces, machines, steam engines and huge factories of the new manufacturing system.³⁴ The Reverend Benjamin Newton from Yorkshire commented bitterly that 'the greatness of Great Britain depended I may say principally on the defacing of the hand of nature in these parts by the hand of man'.³⁵ Manchester provided Engels (and a long list of other commentators and political reformers long before he set up business there) with an exemplary case of the kind of degraded environment that followed from the construction of factories, the installation of coal fired systems of energy and the concentration of houses, populations and waves of migrants from the countryside in confined spaces.³⁶ These unregulated and seemingly uncontrollable features of urbanization became characteristic of the North, Midlands and the Lowlands of Scotland. Scattered across the landscape, scores of growing towns (Liverpool, Leeds, Glasgow, Sheffield, Bradford, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Oldham, Preston, Keighley, Doncaster etc.) displayed environments as smoky, smelly, dirty, unsanitary, depressing and as jerry built as Manchester.³⁷ By 1851, when over half the kingdom's population lived in such places, England

³³ Southey, *Sir Thomas More*, I, p. 197. Cited by Hartwell, *Industrial Revolution*, p. 90. Read also the poet, writing under a *nom de plume*, Don Manuel Espriella, 'Letters from England (1807)', in Trench, *Travellers in Britain*, pp. 191-205.

³⁴ On the reaction of Romantic artists and writers to the impact of the industrial revolution see Cloudsley, 'Romanticism'.

³⁵ Fendall and Crutchley, *Diary of Benjamin Newton*. Cit. in Jennings, *Pandaemonium*, p. 140.

³⁶ Douglas, Hodgson and Lawson, 'Industry, Environment and Health', pp. 235-9. See also Chadwick, 'Face'; Pooley and Pooley, 'Health'.

³⁷ Briggs, *Victorian Cities*; Morris, 'Industrial Town'.

contained 63 towns with over 20,000 inhabitants compared with just 15 in 1801.³⁸

Living in such towns and employed in their factories, observers found Britain's urban populations (men, women and children) - whom they represented in literature and discussions of the day as overworked, sick, deformed, pallid, stunted, morally depraved – deprived of religion, education, community and paternal governance.³⁹ Inevitably the preoccupation of the elite, evangelical Christians, romantic poets, morally concerned novelists and Benthamite intellectuals, with the landscape, with the 'health of towns' and 'the conditions of the poor and deprived' provoked responses from the owners and managers of mines, mills and factories, merchants, shopkeepers and businessmen of all kinds as well as their spokesmen in parliament and the press. They accused reformers and would be regulators of society of hypocrisy; called upon Government to repeal taxes levied on the necessities of the working classes, especially grain, militated for extensions to the franchise; pressed for a more rationally administered, cheaper and properly funded system of social welfare and demanded from their aristocratic rulers the espousal of an ideology in favour of *laissez faire* and unregulated markets.⁴⁰

Historians have exposed how far the evidence (official reports, books, commentaries, statistical data as well as popular literary sources) is in many ways contaminated with romantic nostalgia for the passing of a pastoral agricultural economy, with the ideological, political and religious preoccupations of the day, with the geopolitics of the empire, with the anomalous survival of a feudal aristocracy, deference to hierarchy and

³⁸ Up-to-date surveys of this literature have been brought together in Thompson, *Cambridge Social History of Britain*, II and III. See also Reeder and Rodger, 'Industrialization', pp. 553-92; Langton, 'Urban Change'.

³⁹ Choi, 'Writing'.

⁴⁰ The debate has been definitively surveyed in Hartwell, *Industrial Revolution*, ch. 5 on 'Interpretation of the Industrial Revolution in England'. See also Hardy, 'Conceptions', pp. 1-16, 296-307.

other manifestations of tradition, and far less with any celebration of progress.⁴¹ For more than a century after Arnold Toynbee's generation of reformers had reluctantly accepted England as an urban industrial society and represented the transition in cataclysmic terms, historians have not only been accumulating more evidence but have basically been engaged in sifting, classifying and reconfiguring British debates and commentaries of the day on changes that came to be first pejoratively and later triumphantly labelled as the First Industrial Revolution. After protracted debate they are more deeply aware that the sources they use to configure the British Industrial Revolution in their narratives and analyses are the product of contemporary concerns to construct a political system with a framework of laws and institutions to maintain order, stability and a measure of social justice at a time of an economic transition that is no longer represented as either revolutionary or cataclysmic.⁴²

Perceptions and Conceptions from the Mainland

Those self same national sources and writings, together with the immediate observations that they wrote down as visitors to the off-shore isles, constitute the only other available body of evidence for any perceptions that might be used to formulate conceptions about Britain's Industrial Revolution properly embedded in its spatial and historical contexts. Observations by travellers from the mainland may appear superficial, but they are interesting to contemplate because they emanate as the immediate visual impressions of visitors from other cultures prone to comment upon novelties and contrasts with their own societies and economies. Deeper analyses and reflections on a 'British case' – or model - can be found in the writings of philosophers, lawyers, economists

⁴¹ Stafford, *Socialism, Radicalism and Nostalgia*, pp. 136-42.

⁴² O'Brien and Quinault, *Industrial Revolution*.

and men of affairs already engaged in discourses with their compatriots about the nature, desirability and relevance of courses of comparable economic social and political change for the rest of Europe.⁴³

Travelogues provide snap shots (with occasional arresting comments) on features of the realm's economy and society that a stream of American, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Swedish and Swiss visitors found sufficiently interesting to write down and evaluate. None of these articulate travellers came without prior expectations. Their comments should also be located within an evolving tradition of continental views upon Britain's culture, society and political system that had swung from the Anglophilia of Montesquieu, Voltaire and their generation early in the eighteenth century to the antipathies of Rousseau, Diderot and Manby during the American rebellion.⁴⁴ After 1815 that tradition had moved on to include a dominant strain of virulent Anglophobia from European radicals against a state that had led and subsidized coalitions of autocratic monarchs to repress the armies and ideals of the French Revolution.⁴⁵ For some decades after the defeat of Napoleon and the settlement in favour of status quo at the Congress of Vienna, very few liberal intellectuals from the mainland remained prepared to represent British institutions and society as a model for political and social progress.⁴⁶ That model only re-emerged when 'perfidious Albion' virtually withdrew after 1848 from continental power politics into the comfort of free trade with imperial splendour and the isolationism of rhetoric in favour of freedom and democracy.⁴⁷

⁴³ Romani, *National Character*.

⁴⁴ For a brief but incisive analysis of eighteenth-century French views of England's success see the chapter on 'Les sources de la richesse de l'Angleterre, vues par les Français du XVIIIe siècle', in Crouzet, *Supériorité*, pp. 105-19.

⁴⁵ Hampson, *Perfidy of Albion*, pp. 1-18; Langford, 'English as Reformers'.

⁴⁶ Elkington, *Relations de société*, pp. 101-20.

⁴⁷ Harvey, *Collision of Empires*, pp. 79-84.

A flow of technologists and industrial spies on official missions began early in the eighteenth century.⁴⁸ They visited to study machinery, processes and the modes of organizing manufacturing on the islands and were normally complementary about the high quality of British products and artefacts, their novelty and taste.⁴⁹ Most of these visitors were convinced that the essence of industrialization lay in specific machines or in the development of particular sectors, especially iron and engineering.⁵⁰ The secret of England's technological supremacy was researched not only by spies, but also by private businessmen and entrepreneurs who came to Britain for technical training particularly after 1815. All of this group were surely more keen to collect useful information and practical advice than to formulate general and coherent impressions of social transformation. For example, Pierre André Docoster was able to introduce the latest flax-spinning technology into France a year after visiting similar mills in England.⁵¹ Others, like Dufrénoy, Beaumont, Coste and Le Play or the German architects Schinkel and Beuth, came to discover the secrets of iron, hot blast processes and cast steel.⁵² Overall, this category of visitor remained confined in number, relying more on publications by compatriots than on visits to Britain. The few foreign entrepreneurs who saw Britain with inquisitive eyes, refused the ineluctability of the evils associated with industrialization. For example, the Italian businessmen Alessandro Rossi developed his

⁴⁸ Harris, 'Industrial Espionage'; Fritz, 'British Influence'; Harris, *Industrial Espionage*.

⁴⁹ On the perception of British artefacts in the eighteenth century see Styles, 'Manufacturing, Consumption and Design'; Berg, 'Product Innovation'; *idem*, 'French Fancy and Cool Britannia'.

⁵⁰ For examples of this genre see Palmer, *Angerstein's Illustrated Travel Diary*; Flinn, *Svendenstierna's Tour*, in particular pp. vii-xix; Gallois, 'Rapport', pp. 129-44; Dutens, *Mémoires*; Dupin, *Voyages*; Mosca, *Relazione*; Henderson, *J. C. Fischer*.

⁵¹ Henderson, *Britain and Industrial Europe*, p. 33.

⁵² Dufrénoy and de Beaumont, *Voyage*; Coste and Perdonnet, *Mémoires*; Le Play, *Description*; Schinkel, *English Journeys*.

paternalistic views and rejected the English model of industrialization after visiting Britain in the early 1840s.⁵³

The mainstream was much more concerned to record the most visually striking features of British industry which they often represented in romantic images of the time. Here is Flora Tristan (the French feminist and socialist) looking at 'a steam engine with the power of 500 horses'. 'Nothing', she writes,

'could be more impressive and awe-inspiring than the sight of these iron masses in motion; their gigantic dimensions strike terror into the imagination and dwarf the capacities of Man ... The huge bars of gleaming iron, raised and lowered forty or fifty times a minute to set the monster's tongue darting in and out as if to devour everything in sight; the dreadful groans it emits; the rapid revolutions of the immense wheel that issues from its entrails only to return before it has revealed more than half its vast circumference; all this fills the soul with terror. In the presence of the monster, you have eyes and ears for nothing else'.⁵⁴

The growing volume of inanimate energy provided by coal, coke, fire and steam harnessed to speed up production across an ever widening range of manufacturing processes (brewing, printing, spinning, weaving, pumping, smelting, rolling, forging, cutting, grinding) impressed visitor after visitor and gave rise to numerous references to British industry as the 'Empire of Vulcan'.⁵⁵ As travellers, Europeans could hardly fail to appreciate the potential of moving people and freight speedily, cheaply and comfortably by railways - linking city to city, town to countryside and integrating markets. Count Cavour marvelled at them. 'It is something beautiful', he wrote. 'More than a thousand arches will support this unique road: a steam carriage will pass through as quick as thunder and

⁵³ Fontana, 'Onda tessile', p. 96.

⁵⁴ Tristan, *Promenades*, p. 71.

⁵⁵ Fisk, in a highly lyrical tone, describes the Black Country as 'Vulcania' burning like 'the perpetual fires of the Valley of Hinnom, with the smoking sacrifices of writhing infants offered upon altars of Moloch'. Fisk, *Travels*, p. 504. A similar metaphor is used by Beltrami, MacLellan and the economist Chevalier. Beltrami, *A Pilgrimage*, p. 432; MacLellan, *Journal*, p. 116; Chevalier, *Society*, p. 25.

people will think they are flying over the river and the fields'. Only England produced buildings that could compete with Roman architecture.⁵⁶

In tropes of the day, along with others Karl Friedrich Schinkel remarked frequently on the widespread use of cheap iron in civil and mechanical engineering as well as observing 'magnificent iron roofs, iron vaulting, iron staircases, slender iron columns'.⁵⁷ The Italian Count Pecchio was astonished at the view of '*infinite macchine che nelle manifatture centuplicano le mani dell'uomo*' (the infinite machinery that multiply the number of hands in factories).⁵⁸ The German Escher found that one 'might have arrived in Egypt since so many factory chimneys... stretch upwards towards the sky like great obelisks'.⁵⁹ The palatial and ecclesiastical scale of factories in northern towns never failed to excite comments of the kind made by Tocqueville when he approached Manchester and observed 'Thirty or forty factories rise on the tops of hills ... Their six stories tower up; their huge enclosures give notice from afar of the centralization of industry'.⁶⁰

When travel across the channel and north sea for affluent, literate and curious Europeans resumed after the Napoleonic wars many visitors included industrial towns, ports, factories, mines and forges as well as cathedrals, churches, castles, spas, mountains, lakes and picturesque countryside in their tours of the isles. They were keen to look at the new before passing on to compliment the old.⁶¹ They complained frequently

⁵⁶ Salvatorelli, *Diario*, pp. 202-3. On the identification of the railway with the new industrial age in literature see Givner, 'Industrial History',.

⁵⁷ Schinkel, *English Journeys*, pp. 17-9. On the 'birth of the industrial landscape' and the reactions of contemporaries and visitors see: Crouzet, 'Naissance du paysage' and Lescent-Giles, 'Naissance du paysage'. See also Trinder, *Making of the Industrial Landscape*.

⁵⁸ Pecchio, *Osservazioni semiserie*, pp. 114-5.

⁵⁹ 'Escher's letters', in Henderson, *Industrial Britain*, p. 84. See also Orti, *Lettere d'un recente viaggio*, p. 157.

⁶⁰ Tocqueville, CAHM de, *Journeys to England*, p. 106.

⁶¹ Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics*, p. 2. The Midlands, in particular seemed to provide a satisfactory combination of old and new. The French Vicomte Walsh observed how the view of an industrial town like Birmingham was particularly striking

about English factory masters whose paranoia towards foreign espionage excluded them from visits to many a famous factory.⁶² Yet it would not be unfair to say that the insights into British industrialization that could be derived from this somewhat impressionistic and superficial body of literature are not profound. Travellers tell us that manufacturers were making ever more extensive use of Britain's abundant supplies of cheap coal to generate and replace traditional sources of energy (wind, water, animal and manpower) with heat and steam power. The immediately exciting potential of steam engines for transportation and travel was being realized.⁶³ Iron was replacing wood as the primary material for construction and the manufacture of artefacts. Some workforces and lines of production (particularly textiles) had been localized and concentrated in very large-scale buildings and units of control (factories). The deployment of machinery was becoming widespread and impressive.⁶⁴

The economist and Anglophile Michel Chevalier criticized foreigners for simply reporting on what they saw and for failing to enquire into 'the causes of all this wealth and prosperity'. He appreciated that:

If the subject of industry has occupied their attention a moment, it is only in reference to the fashion of some opera decoration. They have, to be sure, stood amazed at the thousands of vessels whose

because of the contrast with its countryside: '*Habitués depuis plusieurs jours à voir des villes historiques, des palais sans maîtres, des campagnes pittoresques et des ruines, nous étions tout assourdis du bruit et du mouvement d'une ville industrielle*'. Walsh, *Lettres sur l'Angleterre*, pp. 312-3.

⁶² Harris, 'Industrial espionage', pp. 164-65; Raven, *Judging New Wealth*, pp. 233. This was even the case for the King of Saxony who during his travels to England was refused entrance into a gun manufactory in Birmingham. Carus, *The King of Saxony's Journey*, p. 172. Other entrepreneurs carefully controlled what visitors could see and charged an entrance fee like the Spaniard Lobe who had to pay to visit a toy factory in Birmingham 'que nada tenia de nuevo'. Guillermo Lobe, *Cartas*, p. 200. See also Henderson, *J. C. Fisher*, p. 133.

⁶³ The French economist Say underlined how 'there is industry wherever there is coal', although he keenly emphasised technology over the natural endowment: 'But is principally the introduction of machinery in the arts which has rendered the production more economical.' Say, *England*, p. 35.

⁶⁴ Wilson, *Strange Island*, passim. These factors are particularly underlined by Nougaret, *Londres*, p. 6; Humphrey, *Great Britain*, p. 222 and Allen, *The Practical Tourist*, p. 124.

masts stretch out of sight along the Thames or in the docks; they have been delighted with the extent of the great manufacturing towns, the magnitude of the manufactures, and the height of their chimneys, with the magical brilliancy of the gas-lights, with the daring bridges of stone or iron, and with the fantastical appearance of the forge-fires in the night. But they have never asked, how came England to have such a vast number of ships ... and how created these towns, so simple in their architecture, but so fastidiously neat in their spacious streets ⁶⁵

Yet apart from Fredrika Bremer who wondered how ‘this little isle, Britain, has accomplished all this’, no consensus seems to have formed among visitors from the mainland that the island’s industrial lead could be ascribed to any very peculiar or particular qualities embodied in the British character, culture or institutions.⁶⁶ Liberty and toleration continued to be accorded priority by liberals resisting autocracies.⁶⁷ The only common references to *esprit* – or traits of national character (that goes back to the early eighteenth century and had virtually matured into a cliché and which crops up time and time again in travelogues of the post war decades) was the English greed for wealth. ‘A too great eagerness in making money and... an unworthy striving after gain’, as Goede defined it in 1807, was an English trait of which French thinkers, philosophers and even convinced anglophiles, disapproved of since at least the 1720s.⁶⁸ By the early nineteenth century Tocqueville could generalize about its significance with unduly asperity:

The whole of English society is based on privileges of money... So in England wealth has become not only an element in reputation, enjoyment and happiness; it is also an element, and one might almost say the only element, in power, a thing which, as far as I

⁶⁵ Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics*, p. 25.

⁶⁶ Bremer, *England in 1851*, p. 64. See also Langford, *Englishness Identified*, pp. 29-36.

⁶⁷ This factor is examined by Steadman Jones, ‘National Bankruptcy’, pp. 31-60 and Rothschild, ‘The English *Kopf*’, pp. 61-92. See also Turner, *British Travel Writers*, pp. 38-49.

⁶⁸ Goede, *The Stranger in England*, II, p. 109. On eighteenth-century attitudes towards the English see Colley, *Britons*, pp. 30-43 and Bell, ‘Jumonville’s Death’, pp. 45-57.

know, has never happened in any other nation, or in any other century. Wealth, with its weight immensely increased in this way, attracted every other element in man's make up towards it and the whole spirit of humanity was, so to say, carried captive there ... In England it is a terrible misfortune to be poor. Wealth is identified with happiness and everything that goes with happiness ... So all resources of the human spirit are bent on the acquisition of wealth.⁶⁹

With that Germanic trait of moral and cultural superiority that he invariably assumed towards his adopted homeland, Engels, of course, agreed that the English bourgeois was 'ultimately' and 'alone' determined by 'self interest and money gain. In other countries men seek opulence to enjoy life; the English seek it to live.'⁷⁰ Yet the discovery of an 'English *geist*' was not, at least in these decades, a mission for travellers from the mainland, even among those evincing real curiosity about their neighbours' economic successes.⁷¹ Most of them, instead, alarmingly recorded the intensification of work in Britain, not so much on a voluntary basis as recent historians have suggested, but using the discipline of mechanical production.⁷² While early eighteenth-century travellers commented on British 'industriousness' but portrayed also a 'merry England' of frequent feasts, St Mondays and plenty of time spent drinking, the reality and metaphors for lack of leisure and oblivious drinking became established clichés by the early nineteenth century.⁷³

Most visitors found the origins of Britain's precocious industrialization in its long success in international trade, in natural endowments (especially coal) and in institutions or rather the handicaps associated

⁶⁹ Tocqueville, CAHM de, *Journeys to England*, pp. 90, 115.

⁷⁰ Cited in Wilson, *Strange Island*, p. 197.

⁷¹ See in particular Staël-Holstein, *Letters on England*, p. 18; Beltrami, *A Pilgrimage in Europe*, p. 334.

⁷² De Vries, 'Industrial Revolution'; Voth, *Time and Work*, pp. 1-16. See also Reid, 'Decline of St. Monday';

⁷³ Blanqui, *Voyage*, p. 84; Fisk, *Travels*, p. 605; Romagnosi, *Del trattamento de' poveri*, p. 27; Say, *England*, p. 25; Simon, *Observations*, pp. 17-8. See also Thompson, 'Time'; Rule, *Labouring Classes*, pp. 221-4.

with the inappropriate and inefficient legal and political systems of their own countries. Several reassured their compatriots that convergence among European economies had begun to revive after the recovery from revolutionary warfare. Almost no visitor from anywhere in Western Europe evinces any apprehension that catching up could be inordinately difficult or protracted. Charles Dupin, professor of Mechanics at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers concluded his visit to Britain with the suggestion that what had been achieved by England since the last quarter of the eighteenth century '*nous pouvons le faire plus promptement encore, nous pouvons reprendre notre rang en profitant de son expérience comme elle a su profiter de la nôtre. Osons vouloir*'.⁷⁴ Others, like Avot, were less prone to rush and underlined a more gradualist - but still ineluctable – path towards industrialization: '*il faut que la nature mette le temps nécessaire pour accomplir ses vastes desseins*'.⁷⁵ Others again, like the Swiss steel entrepreneur Fischer, who visited Britain several times between 1814 and 1851, foresaw that early industrialization might be followed by economic decline. '*Sic transit gloria mundi*' he commented looking at the decrepit state of Boulton and Watt's Soho in 1851, while sadly remembering his previous visit forty years earlier.⁷⁶

Yet – in the foreground and dominating any conclusions that historians could receive from reading this type of literature – visitors from the mainland represent the social, environmental and cultural consequences of the first Industrial Revolution as 'deplorable'. Most rejected the British model as a way for their own societies to progress. They hoped and anticipated that their often vivid reports on the malign

⁷⁴ Cit. in Jones, *Voyageurs Français*, p. 142.

⁷⁵ Avot, *Lettres sur l'Angleterre*, p. 269. Von Raumer observed how 'Other nations now move at an accelerated pace in the same track; but their advance is no loss to England'. Von Raumer, *England in 1835*, II, p. 210.

⁷⁶ Henderson, *J. C. Fisher*, pp. 131 and 134.

consequences associated with urbanisation, mechanization, the concentration of production in factories, fluctuations in employment, child labour and other 'evils' associated with British industrialization could be avoided. Even a convinced anglophile like Prince Pückler Muskau admitted that 'everything has its dark side' although he added reassuringly that 'that is no reason for rejecting it'.⁷⁷ Of course physiocrats such as Sismondi and Rubichon remained aesthetically opposed to towns and industry.⁷⁸ Other perhaps more serious physiocrats - Simond and Ramagnosi - considered that industrialization created a disequilibrium between town and country which would become an 'irreversible' and 'risky course' to pursue.⁷⁹ Few commentators found the new towns acceptable or the working conditions in factories for women and children anything but lamentable.⁸⁰

Although a majority of visitors come across as impressed with the pace, intensity and productivity of urban manufacturing activities, they very rarely praised the design or aesthetic qualities of the artefacts produced. British commodities were surely not held in regard for their high quality. In servicing an expanding middle market, the materials employed and the final products of the British manufactures did not satisfy the expectations of educated and refined foreign visitors: 'woollen cloths and cashmeres are not so good as those made in France', commented Escher as early as 1814. He pointed out that even the famous English

⁷⁷ Muskau, *Tour in England*, p. 84.

⁷⁸ Sismondi criticised that 'The English nation has found it most economical to give up those modes of cultivation which require much hand-labour, and she has dismissed half the cultivators who lived in her fields; she has found it more economical to supersede workmen by steam-engines; she has dismissed, then employed, then dismissed again, the operatives in towns, and weavers giving place to power-looms, are now sinking under famine; she has found it more economical to reduce all working people to the lowest possible wages on which they can subsist'. Sismondi, *Political economy*, p. 17. See also Rubichon, *Of England*, pp. 6-8.

⁷⁹ Simond, *Journal of a Tour*, II, pp. 214-15 and Romagnosi, *Del trattamento de' poveri*, pp. 45-7.

⁸⁰ See in particular Simon, *Observations*, pp. 17-18; Fisk, *Travels*, p. 605 and Humphrey, *Great Britain*, pp. 135-42.

calicoes were 'much inferior to those made on the continent'.⁸¹ The degeneration of British products was also considered as the result of decreasing aesthetic standards and a widespread lack of taste. This was underlined by visitors well before the national debate for the improvement of design training of the 1840s or the criticism moved against British manufactures at the 1851 exhibition both by foreign judges and British organizers.⁸² If not dismissed as 'grotesque and tasteless', this lack of aesthetic vision was not necessarily attributed to use of machinery, mass production or factory organization.⁸³ Say, in a show of his eclectic interests, blamed the dominant English gothic style for the bad taste and consequent imminent decline of English manufactures.⁸⁴ The Italian Lanza followed instead an economic rationale and attributed the lack of quality and taste to the English search for 'utility' rather than 'beauty': 'English people try to improve their production and decrease the cost of production in order to increase quantities at a fixed price; in France and elsewhere this happens in the opposite way, appearance is united to the attempt to produce at a lower price.'⁸⁵ Visitors, however, seemed particularly allured by 'show shops', like the one owned in Birmingham by the German émigré Edward Thomason, where they were invited to visit the manufactory and to buy expensive products.⁸⁶ While early accounts offer hypnotic visions of new, original and different products, later

⁸¹ 'Escher's letters', in Henderson, *Industrial Britain*, pp. 31 and 33. See also Ratcliffe, 'Manufacturing', pp. 263-328.

⁸² Kusamitsu, 'British Industrialization' and Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace*, pp. 198-220.

⁸³ Espriella, 'Letters' (1807), in Trench, *Travellers in Britain*, p. 199. As Ferri di San Costante underlined '*Il est certain que les manufacturiers de cette nation, sur-tout ceux qui travaillent à des articles de luxe, le font avec moins de goût que ceux de plusieurs autres nations*'. Ferri di San Costante, *Londres et les Anglais*, vol. iii, p. 235.

⁸⁴ Say, *England*, pp. 40-1.

⁸⁵ Lanza, *Viaggio in Inghilterra*, pp. 235-36.

⁸⁶ 'Bodmer's diary', in Henderson, *Industrial Britain*, p. 81; Spiker, *Travels Through England*, p. 54; Orti, *Lettere*, p. 157; Montulé, *Voyage en Angleterre*, p. 106; Muskau, *Tour in England*, p. 78; Stewart, *Sketches of Society*, p. 51.

observations suggest that travellers knew what to expect and were less easily 'blinded' by impulses to buy.

The representations of mainlanders of the environments and conditions in which the inhabitants of Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield and other new towns lived and worked are more evocative than anything published by their British contemporaries. Perhaps their negative views followed from how much they admired English agriculture, and appreciated the picturesque countryside of England and Scotland.⁸⁷ They all enjoyed the amenities (but not the slums) of London and praised the architecture and social capital of 'commercial cities', including Bristol and Liverpool - although Tocqueville suspected that Liverpool might have been adept at hiding poverty.⁸⁸ For the majority, Schinkel's observation that '[t]he sight of an English industrial town ... is most depressing; nothing pleases the eye' is representative, particularly of Manchester which was invariably seen - to quote David Bindman - 'as a violation of nature: a place in which many were enslaved for the profit of the few and the sky was blotted out by smoke and dust'.⁸⁹

Manchester will be forever represented in the hyperbole of Engels as the 'classic type of modern manufacturing town, where the degradation to which the application of steam power, machinery and the division of labour, reduce the working man and the attempts of the proletariat to rise above debasement must likewise be carried to the highest point'.⁹⁰ Engels' famous portrait had, however, been anticipated by several American, French, Italian and German commentaries on the city which also linked the physical and moral degradation of its inhabitants to a squalid and polluted environment that aroused little but disgust among

⁸⁷ Andrews, *Search of the Picturesque*; Gilroy, *Romantic Geographies*, pp. 4-5; Buzard, 'The Grand Tour', pp. 42-7.

⁸⁸ Tocqueville, CAHM de, *Journey*, p. 110

⁸⁹ In Schinkel, *English Journeys*, p. 13.

⁹⁰ Engels, *Condition*, p. 67. See also Stedman Jones, 'Voir sans entendre', pp. 4-17.

visitors from the mainland. Even the normally uncritical Fredrika Bremer, who visited a factory there which styled itself as 'The Great Beehive', commented that it was truly 'an appropriate name for this immense hive of human industry, in which it would not be difficult to forget, sometimes, that man is not a mere working bee, living to fill his part in the hive and then to die!'.⁹¹

Birmingham attracted very similar comments from the King of Saxony who graced the city with a visit in 1844, but found it 'dirty' and 'nasty'.⁹² He agreed with Prince Pücker Muskau's observation that the place was 'one of the most considerable and one of the ugliest towns of England' with (as Gaineau, Lanza, Lobe and Stewart also observed) immense wealth and poverty residing side-by-side in an atmosphere of turbulence and potential for social revolution.⁹³ 'There is nothing', wrote Beltrami, 'but fire and smoke, forges and smiths; everything is black. It is the empire Vulcan and the seat of the useful arts'.⁹⁴ Yet, in some ways Birmingham appeared to many visitors a more appealing alternative than the industrial centres of the north. The small establishments producing pins and papier-mâché or the whip manufactory of Messrs Ashmore and Clarke were praised and compared positively with the enormous size of buildings and machines in Boulton's famous Soho factory.⁹⁵ The view of the 'immeasurable workshop' of the Midlands was followed in Staffordshire by 'acre after acre and mile after mile of kilns and furnaces'.⁹⁶ Those who travelled to Scotland lauded Robert Owen's New Lanark and contrasted it with the miserable workers in Glasgow's cotton

⁹¹ Bremer, *England in 1851*, p. 16.

⁹² Carus, *King of Saxony's Journey*, p. 170.

⁹³ Muskau, *Tour in England*, p. 78; Garneau, *Voyage en Angleterre*, pp. 294-5; Lanza, *Viaggio in Inghilterra*, pp. 190-1 and 235; Lobe, *Cartas*, p. 196; and Stewart, *Sketches*, p. 51.

⁹⁴ Beltrami, *Pilgrimage*, p. 424.

⁹⁵ Spiker, *Travels*, pp. 58-67.

⁹⁶ Fisk, *Travels*, p. 503

factories.⁹⁷ Durham or Newcastle could 'boast but few objects of interest to the traveller'.⁹⁸ Leeds, with its woollen manufactures and Sheffield, with its cutlery workshops attracted even fewer visitors and they commented disparately on more chimneys, forges and mills while rushing towards the ancient buildings of York or the academic calm of Cambridge.⁹⁹

The Political Economy of the Industrial Revolution in European Perspective

Foreign visitors to the offshore Isles come across in their impressions and considered writings as far more concerned with the political and social outcomes of the First Industrial Revolution, than with its origins, causes and potential for economic transformation. This literature suggests that before the mid nineteenth century the British economy was not regarded as a paradigm for the rest of Europe to follow. In general, the basic concerns of observers are to represent the poverty and the physical and moral degradation of the populations of English and Scottish towns; to ponder on the paradox of how an aristocratic regime continued to preside over an industrializing economy, and to speculate about the dangers to stability associated with the gross and growing inequalities of wealth and power that had accompanied profound structural changes to the economy. The prominence they accorded to social change and inequality explains why Ledru Rollin 'brought manufacturing and mercantile England before the assizes of her workers and they answered: we die of hunger under her laws, their competitions grind us down, her

⁹⁷ Meidinger, *Reisen durch Grossbritannien*, p. 188; Blanqui, *Voyage d'un jeune Français*, p. 99; Spiker, *Travels*, p. 235, Simond, *Journal*, p. 279.

⁹⁸ Kohl, *Travels in England*, p. 135.

⁹⁹ Carter, *Letter from Europe*, p. 95.

liberty kills us – it is the robbery of our wages.’¹⁰⁰ Even the emollient Tocqueville noticed ‘The English have left the poor with two rights: that of obeying the same laws as the rich, and that of standing on equality with them if they can obtain equal wealth’.¹⁰¹ Still, as Garneau puzzled when considering Manchester: ‘*malgré la pauvreté de la masse de ses habitants, la ville est une des plus riches de l’Angleterre*’.¹⁰² With insensitivity his compatriot, Stendhal, gloated on the irony of how ‘the excessive and crushing toil of the English workman avenges us for Waterloo ... We for our part have buried our dead and our survivors are happier than the English.’¹⁰³

England’s problems were not limited to its workforce. The entire economic system, although highly successful, was considered to be built on false foundations.¹⁰⁴ Most travellers underlined the instability of England’s new economic prosperity. Social tension, poverty and squalor went hand in hand with the pre-eminence wrongly given to industry over agriculture and commerce: ‘Agricultural industry is permanent’, underlined the ultraconservative Beltrami, ‘and at least supplies bread to eat; whilst commercial industry has its phases, like the moon; wanes or changes its place, and often leaves in misery the numerous population it had drawn together.’¹⁰⁵ Commonplace advice to return to a more ‘balanced system’ also included recipes to alleviate social evils, control poverty and for the recovery of agriculture and commerce. Even economists were sceptical about a compartmentalized vision of social and economic change and underlined the peculiar nature of England’s economic development, sometimes in quite eccentric ways. For example Jean Baptiste Say’s

¹⁰⁰ Ledru-Rollin, *Décadence*. The quote is from Ballam and Lewis, *Visitor’s Book*, p. 120.

¹⁰¹ Tocqueville, CAHM de, *Journey*, p. 91.

¹⁰² Garneau, *Voyage en Angleterre*, p. 295.

¹⁰³ Wilson, *Strange Island*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁴ O’Brien and Keyder, *Economic Growth*, pp. 185-98.

¹⁰⁵ Beltrami, *Pilgrimage*, p. 426.

‘theory’ of why his neighbours and rivals pursued profit, economic efficiency and hard work so relentlessly, attributed the English gospel of work, thrift and enterprise to high taxation that was imposed and maintained to service a public debt which had accumulated and reached an astronomical level of more than two and a half times the national income by the end of a second Hundred Years War with France.¹⁰⁶

Commentaries, impressions, and analyses from the mainland are indeed illuminating to place alongside modern analyses and contemporary British perceptions of social change, but they must be contextualized as products of their time and as addressed to French, German, Swiss and Italian compatriots. Above all, they reflect the conservative, liberal, socialist and nationalistic preoccupations of their authors.¹⁰⁷ For example, all the writings referenced here appeared within living memory of the French Revolution and the turmoil of protracted global warfare associated with that truly revolutionary event. Britain had led coalitions of European powers to ultimate victory over Napoleonic France and the basis for its geopolitical success was widely, but erroneously, interpreted to reside in the efficiency and modernity of the Island’s economy. After such a long and destructive bout of revolutionary and international warfare, European statesmen and their intellectual advisers remained deeply anxious about nationalism and social disorder and concerned about the potential possessed by Britain, as a hegemonic power, to intervene in their domestic affairs, geopolitical ambitions and above all with their overseas trade.¹⁰⁸

Frenchmen remained particularly worried about the stability of their restored monarchy, the potential for social disorder precariously contained in Paris and other expanding towns within France and

¹⁰⁶ Say, *England*. A similar theory was supported also by Blanqui. Blanqui, *Histoire*, pp. 232-8. See also Blanqui’s *Voyage d’un Jeune Français*.

¹⁰⁷ Spiller, *The American in England*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁸ Harvey, *Collision of Empires*, pp. 79-90.

preoccupied with a search for an alternative to Bonapartism which had gripped the imagination of the nation's younger generations since 1799.¹⁰⁹ French economists (including, Say, Dupin, Chaptal, Blanqui and Chevalier), studied the 'British model' and asked how commerce, railways and manufacturing powered by steam and machinery might create the conditions for the prosperity, stability and a new kind of civic society that France required. But to a man they (and a majority of French travellers who crossed the channel after Waterloo) emphatically dissociated their recommendations from two core features of the Industrial Revolution: urban degradation and England's political and social order. In different ways Blanqui, Buret and Ledru Rollin associated pauperism with the survival of aristocracy combined with 'industrial feudalism' and other privileges and monopolies that the political revolution had successfully undermined in France.¹¹⁰ At the same time, most French intellectuals and travellers rejected any return to physiocracy as advocated by the Swiss economist Sismondi, the nostalgia for a hierarchy based on birth expressed by Chateaubriand and other royalists, or the lament for Bonapartist heroism eloquently enunciated by Stendhal.¹¹¹ Their '*sonderweg*' for the progress of France included instead planned investment in social overhead capital, especially railways, a decentralized industrial sector of small scale family firms producing high quality products, the development of their nation's human resources and, above all, the resolute avoidance of the kind of urban pauperism that Flora Tristan despised so vehemently in her accounts of England's manufacturing towns.¹¹² 'You cannot appreciate', she wrote, 'the physical suffering and moral degradation of this class of the population... They live

¹⁰⁹ Alexander, *Bonapartism and Revolutionary*.

¹¹⁰ Romani, *National Character*, ch. 3.

¹¹¹ For a brief overview of Frenchmen's travels in England in the nineteenth century see Roe, *French Travellers*.

¹¹² Steadman Jones, 'National Bankruptcy', pp. 71-2.

suspended between an insufficiency of food and an excess of strong drink; they are all wizened, sickly and emaciated; their bodies are thin and frail, their limbs feeble, their complexions pale, their eyes dead'.¹¹³

Montulé deplored how England '*sous le nom d'industrie ou de spéculation, condamne à des travaux forcés une partie de la population*'.¹¹⁴

National chauvinism and political pride were surely important elements in the conflicting and sometimes confused feelings of French middle-class intellectuals towards Britain.¹¹⁵ Interestingly, travellers from the still young American nation had a different set of preconceptions to consider when formulating ideas about their former motherland.¹¹⁶ Americans approached the British Isles through the port of Liverpool rather than from the idyllic countryside of Kent and Sussex or the amenities of the metropolis. They were immediately thrown into an environment of immense prison-like warehouses, narrow streets, wagons laden with cotton, and the sight of men, women and children 'clothed in wretched garments'.¹¹⁷ Their admiration for the size and modernity of the port and the scale of commerce in Liverpool was soon diminished by the view of an 'unadorned', 'sombre' and 'gloomy' city.¹¹⁸ They mourned, more than any continental traveller, the disappearance of an old and idealized Britain, blaming the 'spirit of improvement' for sweeping away 'every relic of antiquity' or 'picturesque relief'.¹¹⁹

American travellers although admiring the steam, the machines and the enormous chimneys, rejected any English assumption of superiority. If for the older generation of American travellers Britain was still their

¹¹³ Tristan, *Promenades*, pp. 68-9.

¹¹⁴ Montulé, *Voyage*, p. 103.

¹¹⁵ O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic Growth*, pp. 185-8.

¹¹⁶ See in particular Mowat, *Americans in England*; Lockwood, *Passionate Pilgrims*; Mulvey, *Anglo-American Landscapes*; *idem*, *Transatlantic Manner*.

¹¹⁷ MacLellan, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 95.

¹¹⁸ Fisk, *Travels*, p. 492; Griscom, *Year in Europe*, pp. 25-7.

homeland, younger Americans defended their own cultural, social and economic identity.¹²⁰ Thus Orville Dewey dismissed the famous Liverpool railway line as 'not impressive at all' and his compatriot, the Boston Lawyer Elias Derby found English operatives 'generally less intelligent, and less well-clad than our own, and many processes conducted by manual labour, to which mechanization and water power are applied in New England'.¹²¹ 'I am fully of the opinion', proclaimed Nathaniel Carter after visiting a Manchester cotton mill, 'that both in point of machinery and skill in operation, the factory is far inferior to some of those of the same kind in our country'.¹²² 'American modernity' was entwined with an emerging national spirit based on 'prosperity and happiness' rather than on the 'poverty, hunger, and ruin' of many English industrial cities.¹²³ With few exceptions, they attributed these conditions to the low wages paid in England and compared them with the higher incomes of the 'healthy' workers in the new world.¹²⁴

American travellers had no need for revanchism – so common among French travellers – and limited interest in intellectual analyses. Many of them came to Britain to teach, to improve and proselytize, normally as ministers, preachers and Christian reformers.¹²⁵ They commented especially on the misery, ignorance and heavy drinking of the British industrial population and were ready to blame human nature and high wages rather than to view the evils of industrialization as a social problem.¹²⁶ The American 'small community or country village' life was opposed by the more conservative of them to 'the moral depravity and

¹¹⁹ Carter, *Letter from Europe*, p. 48; Tuckerman, *Month in England*, p. 62.

¹²⁰ Mulvey, *Anglo-American Landscapes*, pp. 4-6.

¹²¹ Derby, *Two Months Abroad*, p. 6.

¹²² Carter, *Letter from Europe*, p. 75.

¹²³ *America and England Contrasted*, p. i.

¹²⁴ Humphrey, *Great Britain*, p. 222; Silliman, *Journal*, p. 78. See also Habakkuk, *American and British Technology*, pp. 11-17; 138-39.

¹²⁵ Mulvey, *Anglo-American landscapes*, pp. 6, 37; *idem*, *Transatlantic Manner*, pp. 172-96.

vices of many of the labouring classes' in places like Manchester.¹²⁷ America was a happier nation, characterized by a simple way of living that could be preserved even through the economic development and industrialization of their country.¹²⁸ If the deplorable state of British workers originated from industrialization – commented McLellan – 'better had our wheels cease, and the busy shuttle move no more; better those bright towns, which like Aladdin's palace have sprung up as it were by magic in a single night, with factories, and stores, and dwelling-houses, and churches, filled with an active, moral, and happy population, should be merged in the wilderness again'.¹²⁹ Most of his countrymen believed that there was nothing ineluctable and that the effects of industrialization as seen in Manchester, Leeds or Glasgow were something peculiarly British. They contrasted the poverty and debauchery of English factory workers with 'the well dressed, healthy factory girls of our manufacturing towns'.¹³⁰ If some agreed to be careful not to 'foster a snake in our bosoms or translate to our fertile regions and happy shores the depravities of such places as Manchester, Sheffield and Birmingham',¹³¹ others like the entrepreneur Francis Cabot Lowell went back to Massachusetts after a two-year tour of the Lancashire cotton mills, with ideas of how to mechanize and industrialize production, but at the same time avoid the proletarianization of the workforce.¹³²

Silliman, one of the few Americans to visit Britain before 1815, dismissed any anti-industrialist propaganda at home: 'I am not disposed to join those who rail at manufacturers without informing us how we can do without them'. He was 'fully persuaded of their importance to mankind,

¹²⁶ Fisk, *Travels*, p. 605.

¹²⁷ Allen, *Practical Tourist*, I, pp. 153-4. See also Lees, *Cities Perceived*.

¹²⁸ Olmsted, *Walks and Talks*, pp. 50-65.

¹²⁹ MacLellan, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 112.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ White, *Letters on England*, II, p. 218. Cit. in Lockwood, *Passionate Pilgrims*, p. 55.

¹³² Licht, *Industrializing America*, pp. 26-8.

while I regret the physical, and, more than all, moral evils which they produce'.¹³³ American concerns were shared by Hegel, List and other German intellectuals who certainly appreciated the power and the wealth that could flow from steam-driven mechanized industry, but they too recommended a 'national path' that also avoided the poverty and inequalities associated with the survival of corrupt aristocratic forms of governance, and the unreformed systems of privilege and property rights that survived on the Island.¹³⁴ Engels saw 'pauperism' as the diseased part of an England which was otherwise so flourishing. When he arrived to set up a business in Manchester at the age of 22, Engels wondered: 'Is there any other country where feudalism retains such enduring power... Is the much-vaunted English freedom anything but the purely formal right to act? He contemplated, with satisfaction, how the mounting contradictions of a society 'burdened... not only with a large class of the unpropertied, but... a considerable class of paupers which she [could not] get rid of'.¹³⁵

As Steadman-Jones suggests, a conjunction of discourses concerned with industry, aristocracy and pauperism delineates contemporary European observations and analyses of the First Industrial Revolution.¹³⁶ Some authors like Gentz, de Stael and Chateaubriand applauded the survival of Britain's aristocracy as a source of stability and paternalism during a course of rapid social change. Most deplored the inequalities, hierarchy and deference associated with an *ancien regime* of governance.¹³⁷ Yet, many offered perceptive and ultimately correct predictions as to why England's 'miserable and suffering population'

¹³³ Silliman, *A Journal of Travels*, I, pp. 78-9.

¹³⁴ Hiley, 'German-speaking Travellers', pp. 469-500.

¹³⁵ Engels, *Condition*, p. 222. On the journey to Manchester and Engels' perception of the industrial revolution see Krishnamurthy, 'More than abstract knowledge', pp. 427-48.

¹³⁶ Steadman Jones, 'National Bankruptcy', pp. 61-92.

¹³⁷ O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic Growth*, p. 187.

would probably not - as Sismondi suggested - 'always be a threat to social order'.¹³⁸ Say, Hegel, St. Simon, Chevalier, List, Engels and Marx entertained no nostalgia for Swiss or Tuscan republics or peasants. They insisted on the gains from mechanization and industry and represented unemployment as cyclical and not structural. Most visitors - even those who came before the wars with France - detected that England's republican and revolutionary traditions (admired since the *soujour* of Voltaire by their predecessors from *ancien regimes* from the mainland) had given way after the American Revolution to a culture and a set of ossified institutions permeated with the principles of aristocracy, hierarchy and deference – what Romagnosi defined as a '*senso sociale non trasmesso dagli antenati*' (a social understanding not inherited from their ancestors),¹³⁹ securely buttressed by a nationalistic and imperialistic sense of superiority of 'Britons' over Europe and the rest of the world.¹⁴⁰ That 'culture' (the outcome of a tradition of nearly two centuries of successful mercantilist and naval warfare) over European and Catholic 'others' would, as Cavour, Princess Lieven, Stael-Holstein, Tocqueville and many others predicted, survive and preserve England from the kind of social revolutions that Marx embraced and which other Europeans feared could occur in their own countries.¹⁴¹ Radical observers simply deplored the complacency of the bourgeoisie and the cowardice of British workers, but Tocqueville had spotted that while 'the French wish not to have superiors. The English wish to have inferiors'.¹⁴² Thus he deduced that 'the strength of the English aristocracy did not depend only on itself, but on the feelings of all classes who hope to enter its ranks.'¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Sismondi, *Political Economy*, p. 115.

¹³⁹ Romagnosi, *Del Trattamento de' poveri*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁰ Ballam and Lewis, *Visitor's Book*, pp. 97-125.

¹⁴¹ Jones, *Les voyageurs Français*, pp. 199-212.

¹⁴² Tocqueville, CAHM de, *Journey*, p. 71.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 60.

Apart from Marx, Engels and Ledru Rollin, a remarkable consensus pervades the observations and analyses of visitors and travellers from the mainland concerning traits of national character and an insular culture that had and would continue to sustain stability in England despite the horrifying social and environmental manifestations of the First Industrial Revolution. That stream and commentary is summed up in an eloquent chapter on the Islands 'Manners and Customs' included in a guide for German visitors to Britain's Great Exhibition of 1851: 'A principal trait in an Englishman's character, and the basis not merely of the conventions but also of the political structures of his nation' - explains the guide - 'is his willingness to subordinate himself to anyone in society who is superior to him. At the same time, with inexorable rigidity, he expects from his inferiors that deference to which his station, his fortune and his family standing entitle him.'¹⁴⁴ And the guide went on to warn Germans that 'the genuine patriotism of the English, which manifests itself not so much, as the British pretend, in their loving their homeland as it does in their looking down upon all other lands and people'.¹⁴⁵ In short the culture of the Isles so 'eminently aristocratic, deeply ingrained with habits of deference and a common sense of hierarchy' had not been 'reordered' by the Industrial Revolution or the squalor of urbanization.¹⁴⁶ In all its essentials, that culture survived more or less 'intact' for centuries between its triumphal consolidation after Waterloo down to the trauma of slaughter on the Somme. Before the Great War there would be no closure to the magic of monarchy, the power of aristocracy or the all pervasive superiority of imperialism in that most bourgeois and industrial of societies off the mainland of Europe.

¹⁴⁴ Arnstein, 'A German View', p. 185.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 203.

¹⁴⁶ Staël-Holstein, *Letters*, p. 41.

Perceptions and Reconstructions

In this account of the Industrial Revolution, space and emphasis has been accorded to the perceptions – qualified by mention of preconceptions and preoccupations – of European and American travellers to the offshore Isles who considered Britain's economic development in the thirty years between Waterloo and the Great Exhibition. Their diaries, autobiographies and *memoires* abound with descriptions and comments on England's industrial development in the form of highly lyrical scenes, amazing industrial processes, nostalgic visions of nature and praise of modernity, but also extremely critical views about the poverty, squalor and disamenities of urban living. These are the original sources used by earlier generations of historians to present the first coherent vision of a process of economic change that they castigated as 'the Industrial Revolution'. From Toynbee to the Hammonds, the social evils of industrialization – but also mesmerizing visions of technology and modernity – are at the core of a type of historical analysis that was and still is only tangentially touched by the methodologies of social science. That positivistic agenda – the paradigm for modern economic history – has offered complex reinterpretations of the Industrial Revolution based on the specification and testing of hypotheses, on explanations and evidence, on a reification of quantification and on the contextualization of Britain's famous conjuncture within broader geographical patterns. The words, thoughts, opinions and sometimes extravagant comments of those who 'lived' through these changes have been explicitly dismissed or sidelined as biased, incomplete, scientifically invalid and historically incoherent. They are ultimately relegated to colourful quotations, leaving them empty of heuristic value.

Prompted by post-modern concerns with the 'recovery of meaning', our article has attempted to re-habilitate these 'sources' (particularly impressions from off shore) contextualizing them into a time-specific

reconstruction of the Industrial Revolution. Our commentary exposes how most of these writings follow national traditions and express the social and economic positions of their authors. Most observations are highly selective because they record only what was perceived as different or extraordinary, leaving out the shared features across European economies of the time.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, and despite its recent embrace by cultural historians, travel writing remains a less than transparent source and provides us with no clear, uncontaminated or objective vision of industrializing Britain.¹⁴⁸ They are works of their day that confirm shared values and link individual observers to their preferred communities.¹⁴⁹ For example, the American MacLellan was comforted to see how the 'sloth' of British workmen 'was altogether such as I had been led to anticipate by the dark descriptions which have been drawn of them'.¹⁵⁰ Others borrowed stylistic tropes when portraying infernal visions of fire, smoke, furnaces and steam engines, following the by then established romantic visions of nature and man inspired by contemporary poets, novelists, philosophers and painters.¹⁵¹ Most visitors found the experience of the 'sublime' not only in the mountains of the Lake District, but also in mills, mines and forges.¹⁵²

Some of these travel diaries were also clearly inspired by eighteenth-century travel books that had matured into a literary genre of specific narratives and descriptive conventions. Thus it is not surprising to find

¹⁴⁷ There are only rare observations on the traditional features of the British economic system. The German travelwriter Johann Georg Kohl, for example, observed when visiting Leeds in the early 1840s how wonderful it was that 'with all the prodigious advances of the factory system, its steam-engines and capital, the 'domestic clothiers' have not long since vanished from the land, and that the little manufacturers have not sunk into mere salaried servants of the great capitalists and machinery owners.' Kohl, *Travels*, p. 160.

¹⁴⁸ Elsner and Rubiés, 'Introduction', pp. 1-56; Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology*, pp. 1-34.

¹⁴⁹ Hunt, 'Racism', p. 340.

¹⁵⁰ MacLellan, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 95.

¹⁵¹ Klingender, *Art*, pp. 72-90.

¹⁵² Tinniswood, *Polite Tourist*, pp. 130-32.

how the physical description of towns and cities was followed by discussions on manners and customs and conclusions that attempted to understand the 'produce and improvement' of lands, trade and manufactures. This classic catalogue of generic writing had been around since Defoe's *Tour of England* in the 1720s.¹⁵³ The genre filtered into a traveller's narratives not only through the application of descriptive and literary formulas. It also provided guidance on how best to discover a new nation and to incorporate strange and mesmerising industrial processes. Travel accounts were used not only as entertaining readings in middle-class drawing rooms, but became travel guides for neophyte travellers visiting the degrading cotton mills of Manchester or enjoying the inebriating experience of railways. Although some of these diaries and travelogues were not intended for publication, others became well-known books in their respective countries, thus influencing their middle-class readers' perception of Britain's industrial progress.¹⁵⁴ The *Revue Britanique*, for instance, appeared in Paris from 1825 and was a 'recueil d'observations' on disparate aspects of British society, customs, and economic and social matters. It published abridged versions of works from the latest travellers to Albion, including Blanqui, Pichot, Chasles and Nodier.¹⁵⁵ The diaries of some of the most famous travellers like Beltrami, Goede, Pückler Maskau, Say or the King of Saxony were translated into English soon after their publication servicing a British public in search of anecdotal evidence for foreign outlandishness, but also social explanation, 'lateral thinking' and self assurance.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Batten, *Pleasurable Instruction*, p. 32. See also Fabricant, 'The Literature of Domestic'.

¹⁵⁴ Rubiés, 'Instructions for travellers', pp. 141-2. The fictional Don Manuel Alvarez Esprilla's *Letters from England* (1807) was one of the best-known travelogues in the early nineteenth century. See Simond, *Journal*, p. 91.

¹⁵⁵ Elkington, *Les Relations*, p. 189.

¹⁵⁶ Leask, *Curiosity*, p. 11. See also Morgan, *National Identities*.

Recent cultural and social approaches to history have attributed the greatest importance to conveying an understanding of contemporaries' views of themselves and the social and economic change they actually experienced during their lives.¹⁵⁷ This 'empathic' and 'relativistic' way of making history is often opposed in a facile way to the kind of history interested in causes and effects in metanarrative, in trends, macrophenomena and the *longue durée*.¹⁵⁸ Post-modernist critiques have exacerbated this unsustainable divide by conflating different methodologies with the supposedly antithetical values of positivistic versus humanistic history. Our three reconstructions of the British Industrial Revolution as presented here hoped to expose complementarity, rather than divergent affirmative modes of conceptualizing a famous conjuncture in British history. While modern social science clearly gives priority to the pursuit of causes and to mechanisms of evolution, contemporaries (British and foreigners) were understandably more concerned in making sense of a social reality that was not only seen as new but also perceived as a threat to their assumptions about human behaviour, humankind and society at large.

The sources considered in this article cannot be used either to prove or disprove the reality of the events that shaped the British economy in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, their value does not rest solely in their capacity to 'express' feelings, perceptions and sensations of individuals that can, more or less correctly, be representative of wider communities, societies or national groups. In between the 'ideal' and the 'real', travellers' testimonies provide an enormous contribution to the history of political and economic ideas of the time.¹⁵⁹ Rather than taking them at a face value, they must be understood and interpreted within

¹⁵⁷ Pallares-Burke, *The new history*.

¹⁵⁸ Mandler, 'Problem', pp. 94-5.

¹⁵⁹ Godelier, 'The ideal and the real', p. 13.

intellectual constructions that influenced, and sometimes shaped, the political economy and decision making of European continental countries. Visitors' narratives and metaphors of Britain's industrial revolution were serving other purposes rather than explaining the events that transformed the offshore islands. The belief that the British victory over Napoleonic France was the direct result of the island's economic supremacy is crucial to the very invention of the term 'industrial revolution' as a counterbalance and an explanatory tool for the failure of France's political revolution.

Rather than underlining the social biases, the political dispositions or the myopia of British contemporaries and European travellers, we have tried to represent their writings, diaries and travelogues as 'subjective' and 'selective' but also entirely illuminating as reconstructions of their own times. Since the past is another country, the Industrial Revolution remains too important a transition to be confined within the narrow theories and regressions of social sciences; and too significant to those who lived through such hard times to suffer from the condescension of linguistic spins or the pretentious sensitivities of new cultural history. Meanings must not only be recovered but redefined, validated and contextualized to transcend the anecdotes and 'stories' passed off to the public as history by our media of mass communication.

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