

Second Beginning

By Asa Briggs

ECONOMIC HISTORIANS have never had their own way with the industrial revolution: perhaps for this reason many of them have been unhappy about the term with its obvious cross-references to politics and its implicit, if sometimes forgotten, comparison between experience in Britain and France. Yet it was not only the idea of industrial revolution which raised such issues. The term "industrialism" carried with it more than a narrowly economic set of concepts: like any other *ism* it had its advocates and its opponents. Shortly before his death St.-Simon commissioned Rouget de l'Isle to write a new industrial *Marseillaise*, and a *Chant des Industriels* was sung, in St.-Simon's presence, at the opening of a textile factory at St. Ouen in 1821.

In recent years it has become almost a platitude to say that the industrial revolution changed ways of feeling as much as it changed ways of working or thinking, and more attention has been paid by historians of literature and of art than ever before both to the responses of particular writers to the rise of modern industry and to the kind of society which was being "destroyed" or "created" in the process. And although the early British industrial revolution, portent rather than prototype, seemed to have only a limited amount to do directly with "science," science and technology which came together dramatically, if often falteringly, during the last decades of the 19th century have seldom been kept apart by the commentators. "The age of science and technology," Karl Jaspers has written comprehensively, "is a kind of second beginning, comparable to the first invention of tools and fire-making."

Within this extended context of inquiry Professor Landes' book,¹ for all its erudition, is somewhat disappointing. Its ambitious title

promises much. It is only at the end of the book, however, that the Prometheus myth is discussed—on the very last page—although it has been earlier introduced briefly along with the stories of the Tower of Babel and of Eve, the serpent and the tree of knowledge. Professor Landes admits that on the first occasion when he cited the stories of Eve and Prometheus and Daedalus to his academic colleagues as evidence of the age and continuity of the spirit of striving and mastery in Western culture, they objected that the content of the myths proved rather the hostility of Western tradition to insolent aspirations. He lets the matter slide. Why did he choose his title if he believes that "one can hardly rest a serious prognosis on symbol and legend"?

Imaginative reactions to industrial revolution or to industrialism do not, indeed, figure very prominently in Professor Landes' book—either the reactions of the first poets and pamphleteers or the recent reactions of the prophets of a "post-industrial society." It is not easy, therefore, to catch either the sense of excitement or the undercurrent of uneasiness. He concludes that

the West, at the very time when it is losing some of its own faith [why?] . . . is transferring its most profound and original heresy to others. It is a dangerous export, for aspirations and pretensions are not enough—indeed, are worse than nothing if not accompanied by the values and way of thought that promote effective performance.

It would have been helpful had Professor Landes explored more fully writers as different as John Nef and Raymond Williams, both of whom have tried to put "industrialism" into perspective and to trace the development of "new structures of feeling." Words like "striving" and "mastery" require as much examination as the word "industry" itself, which was thought of as a particular human attribute before it was identified as a sector of the

ASA BRIGGS is the editor of "Chartist Studies" (1959, Macmillan), and author of "Victorian Cities" (1964, Odhams) and (with John Saville) of "Essays in Labour History" (1967, Macmillan). He is Vice-Chancellor and Professor of History at the University of Sussex.

¹ *The Unbound Prometheus*. By DAVID S. LANDES. Cambridge University Press, 70s., \$8.50, paper, 25s. \$2.95.

economy. Metaphors like the "taming of Nature" require to be scrutinised. We can legitimately expect such examination and scrutiny in a book called *The Unbound Prometheus*.

Yet if we forget the title, which is not easy, Professor Landes' book is a considerable achievement of synthesis within economic history. It has grown out of the chapters which he wrote for the *Cambridge Economic History* and takes the story beyond 1914 where it originally stopped. It is not a textbook but an "essay in interpretation," and its footnotes cover most, if not all, of the contributions made by other economic historians to the economic history of the last hundred and fifty years. It is strong on comparison, weaker at points where economic history is itself still weak or unresolved, as, for example, on the relation between population change and industrialisation. It does not emphasise sufficiently, perhaps, the contrast between the "individualism" of 18th- and 19th-century industrialism and the "organisation" behind 20th-century industrialism, between the wastes of "carboniferous capitalism" and the complexities inherent in the 20th-century dependence on the most accurate computation. Yet it will be widely read and appreciated as the first "general, truly comparative survey of the course of the European industrial revolution." Professor Landes' own highly original work on French economic history obviously provided him with an excellent point of departure for the kind of comparative survey he has now accomplished, undoubtedly a *tour de force* in his own subject.

PROFESSOR MATHIAS' study of England² makes fewer claims. It is, indeed, a useful and well-arranged textbook based on lectures given in Cambridge. It notes in its preface that "new methods are bringing a wholly new style into economic history," but it does not seek to argue whether or not the "main single change" which is going on—"the challenge of an historical method based on 'literary' evidence and unsystematic data, with its own critical evaluation, by systematic quantitative analysis" is going to satisfy the desire to explain as well as to describe. Professor Mathias admits that "the search for a verified general theory of economic growth, and further incursions of even less integrated sociological theorising, suggests that the new attempts to measure and to analyse may yield more disparate than unified conclusions," but having made the admission he proceeds honestly and competently to make the

² *The First Industrial Nation*. By PETER MATHIAS. Methuen, 60s., paper, 28s.

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best of the new approach. His main comparative reference is not to Europe but to countries "wrestling with the problems of generating economic growth in developing societies in our own day," and it is well to be reminded that national income *per capita* in late nineteenth-century England may have been more than double that of a present-day undeveloped country, such as Nigeria, with a very large subsistence peasantry.

Some of the main difficulties in his presentation concern the terms of discourse. Words like "the state," "state intervention," "administrative controls" are more difficult to handle across time and place than the concept of "the market." So too is a word like "unemployment." It is one of the problems of re-writing economic history in the light of the current language of economics that the historical debate at any past moment of time is often highly simplified. Yet Professor Mathias does not neglect it. He also introduces an occasional moral judgment of his own with a significant heightening of tone.

Some of the apostles of *laissez-faire*, who resisted every limitation imposed upon employers by statute in the name of individual liberty and the boggy of impending commercial disaster, deserved to end up on the lowest ledges of Dante's inferno. It is a false assumption that industrialisation had no tragedies or iniquities to hide.

It is when Professor Mathias has to cover a vast mass of material relative to a long period of time that the problem-centred approach which he favours inevitably tends to awkward compression, as in the brief chapter on "Agriculture, 1815-1914." Likewise in his valuable chapter on "The Free Trade System and Capital Exports" he has little space to examine the significance of "empire." His epilogue on the inter-war years deals highly selectively with a period which in many respects now seems as remote as the early years of the industrial revolution. In this context Professor Landes' comparative analysis becomes particularly relevant. Britain by then had long ceased to be the only industrial nation or the first industrial nation in the league-table sense. How far did the distinctive British experience of industrialisation—industrialisation within a society which never completely accepted industrial values—prevent it from appreciating new possibilities? Yet how and why did it avoid the more dramatic consequences of economic breakdown which can be traced in other parts of the world? What was meant by "economic policy"? Of what issue could it *not* be said that "the question is many-

sided, with the policy recommendations always dependent on the diagnosis for the disease"?

IN HIS CHAPTER ON "The Organisation of Labour and Standards of Living" Professor Mathias touches briefly on what he calls the "negative reactions" to industrialisation—the outbreaks of machine-breaking, rick-burning, "in some ways" Chartism, "the survival of a notion characteristic of the pre-industrial world." *Captain Swing*³ is a detailed study, the first since the Hammonds', of what the authors call "the most impressive episode in the farm-labourers' long and doomed struggle against poverty and degradation." It is an interesting and important book, but it reveals clearly that if it is difficult to sort out the complex reactions (negative or positive) to "industrialism," it is even more difficult to get inside the "primitive" minds of the early 19th-century agricultural labourers, "the secret people" as they have aptly been called. Dr. Hobsbawm and Dr. Rudé accumulate a mass of evidence, most of it new, but they find it very difficult to explain the pattern of local revolt. The basic aims of the village labourers seem to have been reasonably consistent—to attain a minimum living wage and to end rural unemployment (a word they did not use)—but their protest was "multiform." Even the most careful survey of what happened in different places does not point to a definite conclusion as to why some villages were quiet and others disturbed. None the less, the one clear consequence of the village labourers' revolt, "negative reaction" or not, was that threshing machines did not return to English farms on the old scale.

Of all the machine-breaking movements of the 19th century that of the helpless and unorganised farm labourers proved to be by far the most effective. The real name of King Ludd was *Swing*.

Dr. Hobsbawm and Dr. Rudé are sophisticated analysts of phenomena which may often have had very little to do with the advent of industry. Accepting as they do the necessity of industrial transformation, they insist that "it is difficult to find words for the degradation which the coming of industrial society brought to the English country labourer." We are back again at ways of thinking and feeling. The "second beginning" involves far more than statistics, and a bigger dose of Cobbett, who never had difficulty in finding words, would have brought more life into the account they give. "Literary guidance and unsystematic data" are still necessary to illuminate the human experience which is at the heart of all history, including economic history.

³ *Captain Swing*. By E. J. HOBSBAWM and G. RUDÉ. Lawrence & Wishart, 70s.

Prague: Spring & Fall

Explaining the Czech Crisis — By Z. A. B. ZEMAN

TWO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL fragments by a man and a woman who were caught up in the Prague show trial of 1952, Eugene Loeb and Josefa Slanská¹; two journalists' accounts of the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968, by Harry Schwartz and Joseph Wechsberg²; two books of documents³; two works of academic analysis,⁴ one by Philip Windsor and Adam Roberts, the other edited by Robert Rhodes James. Those are the first volumes in a fast-growing library on the Czechoslovak communist reform movement.

Rudolf Slanský, a lifelong communist, a partisan leader in the 1944 Slovak uprising, a tough and ambitious man, since March 1945 the General Secretary of the party, was awarded the Order of Socialism on 30 July 1951. At the pinnacle of his power, he was to receive the greatest honour of all: the publication of his speeches and articles in a magnificent two-volume edition which would be dispatched to every local party organisation in the remotest villages in the country, and join the collected works of President Gottwald on the dusty shelves. Four months later Slanský was arrested and handed over to the secret police. There is no record that Slanský had been critical of its methods when he was in power. That did not make them any more humane. Severe mental pressure alternated with physical torture, an appeal to loyalty to the Party was followed by haggling about the actual terms of the bogus confession. The defences of the individual personality were knocked out, one after the other. The self-confidence of the former General Secretary disappeared first, the identity of Rudolf Slanský last. He was tried, sentenced to death, and executed in December 1952. The ashes of Slanský and ten other defendants were scattered on an icy cart-track somewhere in the vicinity of Prague.

Slanský did not know that he had been condemned a year before his execution. On

6 December 1951 Klement Gottwald reported to the Central Committee on the "treason of Slanský and the leading role he played in the conspiracy against the Party and the State." Gottwald, the President and the pre-war Party leader, had taken a vicious turn against his former comrades. Why? We may never know. The circumstances at the time provided only circumstantial evidence. Stalin's break with Tito was clean; the first slanging matches of the cold war had died down; the hot war in Korea was difficult to conclude. Stalin, in the process of consolidating his East European empire, ruled out a special Czechoslovak way to socialism. In Prague, Gottwald sacrificed his comrades to Stalin and political expediency. He thereby wiped out his lifelong work.

Neither of the two books of reminiscences, one by the General-Secretary's widow, the other by a former Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade who had been sentenced to life imprisonment at the same trial, attempt to solve that puzzle. But they answer, indirectly, another and more important question. The personal quality of their reminiscences sharply illuminates the origins of the Czechoslovak reform movement, why that movement had to happen. The medieval beastliness of the examination (Dr. Loeb remarks that afterwards "I was a completely normal person, apart from the fact that I had ceased to be human"); the pitiless farce of the trial; the animal passions that those trials evoked (people's joy at the swing of the wheel of fortune was probably the kindest of those emotions). And beyond the eerie public show there were tens of thousands of Czechs and

¹ *Sentenced and Tried*. By EUGENE LOEB. Elek Books, 42s.; *Report on My Husband*. By JOSEFA SLANSKÁ. Hutchinson, 35s.

² *Prague's 200 Days*. By HARRY SCHWARTZ. Pall Mall Press, 50s.; *The Voices*. By JOSEPH WECHSBERG. Doubleday, \$3.95.

³ *Dubček's Blueprint for Freedom*. Edited by HUGH LUNGH and PAUL ELLO. William Kimber, 50s. *The Czech Black Book*. Edited by ROBERT LITTELL. Pall Mall Press, 58s.

⁴ *Czechoslovakia 1968*. By PHILIP WINDSOR and ADAM ROBERTS. Chatto & Windus, 15s.

Z. A. B. ZEMAN is the author of "*The Break-up of the Habsburg Empire*" (1961, Oxford University Press), "*Nazi Propaganda*" (1964), and "*Prague Spring*" (1969, Penguin). He teaches history at the University of St. Andrews.