

Structures and Transformations in Modern British History

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‘Structure’ is still an unfashionable word in history. Since the late 1980s, ‘post-structuralism’ (or, more commonly, its elastic cousin postmodernism) has seemed to dominate much historical writing and methodology. The ‘linguistic turn’ has sharpened historians’ attention to the power of language. More recently, interest in ‘identities’ and ‘representations’ has underpinned the popularity of cultural history. Furthermore, most historians – whether they adhere to relativism or not – now think carefully before putting forward overarching narratives involving the state, economy, and international relations determining the course of events. Yet postmodernism did not kill off structure completely. In the 1990s, historians were perhaps too wrapped up in debating the theory rather than actually writing genuinely post-structuralist monographs.⁽¹⁾ Recent history books aimed at the general public, not least Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: the West and the Rest*, have sought to reposition structure at the fore of explanation.⁽²⁾ *Structures and Transformations in British History* has a less bombastic but still authoritative agenda, rethinking the meaning of structure and its role in the evolution of British politics and society since 1750.

This collection of 12 essays is a *festschrift* to the Cambridge scholar Gareth Stedman Jones. Its authors are his former students or colleagues. In their introduction, editors David Feldman and Jon Lawrence describe Stedman Jones’s career as a prism through which to view the trajectory of British social and political historiography of the last 30 years. The beginning of the post-structuralist turn in British political history has often been attributed to Stedman Jones. His essay on the ‘language of Chartism’, reworked for his influential book, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982*, pre-empted the postmodern emphasis upon ‘discourse’ as the major, or even only, structure and form of popular agency.⁽³⁾ Yet, as Feldman and Lawrence underline, Stedman Jones was never a post-structuralist in its most extreme

form. He did not reject all forms of structural agency or place his faith in language alone. On the contrary, Stedman Jones challenged the ‘illusion that empiricist history was somehow non-ideological and non-theoretical’ (p. 8). The essays in this book are thoroughly grounded in this approach.

Feldman and Lawrence assert that the key theme of all the essays is ‘a determination to re-open old questions about the relationship between long-term socio-economic change and changes in culture and practice’ (p. 20). The book re-evaluates three broad structural developments from 1750 to the present day:

1. the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation upon society;
2. the relationship between politics, the state, and social change;
3. the development and evolution of transnational networks.

This is not pure revisionism for the sake of it, however. The authors do not merely ‘re-open old questions’: they consider processes and connections in ways that older histories were never able to do. The authors wish to re-establish structure as a vital, if now more nuanced and contingent, explanation for historical change. The quality of the contributions and the variety of approaches is testimony to their success in achieving this aim, as well as the lively and continued legacy that Stedman Jones himself is shaping.

Urbanisation, industrialisation, and society

The essays begin with E. A. Wrigley’s re-examination of the patterns and effects of population growth in Britain from 1751 to 1851. This is a solid demographical analysis in the mode of the Cambridge Population Group. His main innovation is more detailed analysis using the administrative district of the ‘hundred’ rather than the larger county as a unit of measurement. Wrigley effectively rehabilitates the ‘rupture’ thesis of older demographic histories of the industrial revolution, though pinpointing its effects more specifically to a scale as small as particular hundreds. He concludes that England was saved from a Malthusian crisis by the shift from an agricultural to a ‘mineral-based energy-rich economy’, but ‘markedly lopsided growth was a key element in this success’ (p. 51).

Continuing the theme of rethinking the major socio-economic changes of the late 18th century, Emma Griffin reappraises the effects of civic improvement. She brings together two parallel threads in the historiography of 18th-century urban history: first, the middle-class regulation and suppression of popular customs; and second, Peter Borsay’s influential idea of the ‘urban renaissance’. In the latter narrative, Georgian elites remodelled the physical environments of their towns in pursuit of aesthetic beauty and middle-class leisure. In a broad rebuff to Borsay, Griffin underlines the darker purposes behind civic improvement, principally that of social control. Focusing on marketplaces, she argues for the continuance of a vibrant and disorderly street life in Georgian England, which urban elites attempted, unsuccessfully, to regulate and move out of the towns. The ‘urban renaissance’, therefore, was a civic ideal rather than a social reality. Griffin echoes Hannah Barker and other historians’ recent challenges to the dominance of southern English leisure resorts in the history of Georgian urban development.⁽⁴⁾ The title of the chapter contains the ‘mob’, although only the penultimate couple of pages concern the relationship between civic improvement and popular disorder, a point that I would like to have seen expanded in more detail.

Tristram Hunt follows a similar line to Griffin concerning the relationship between the rise of the big city and the newly urbanised working classes. He examines the myths and realities behind Friedrich Engels’s portrayal of Manchester in his 1845 ‘trail-blazing publication’, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Hunt explains how Engels exaggerated the extent of social zoning, exaggerated class segregation, and deliberately ignored the finely graded divisions within the working classes in order to make early Victorian Manchester fit his preconceived model of the development of industrial capitalism. This is not entirely a new argument about either Engels or Manchester.⁽⁵⁾ Nevertheless, Hunt follows the mode set by Stedman Jones for ‘identifying linguistic and imaginary structures’ that went on to have much broader, and in Engels’ case, world-changing consequences.

Alun Howkins pulls apart the old myths about the effects of enclosure in 18th-century England, namely that

it resulted in the death of the yeomanry and the rise of a new population of landless day labourers. This is a piece of deft historiographical investigation, showing how the particular agenda of late 19th-century historians of enclosure shaped their arguments about dispossessed labour. Radical and socialist politics of the late Victorian period encouraged the persistence of a romanticised pre-enclosure landscape that ignored the realities of historical agricultural practices and labour. Contemporary issues of preservation and access to commons obscured the fact that the majority of land enclosed between 1845 and 1914 was agricultural, and that most enclosers focused on economic improvement rather than deliberately depriving local inhabitants of spaces for leisure. Furthermore, these debates about commons preservation were largely conducted separately from the arguably more pressing issue of general land reform.

Politics, the state, and society

Joanna Innes reconsiders the nature of the growth of central government in England at the tail end of the long 18th century. This is by far the boldest and most far-reaching essay in the collection in the spirit of Stedman Jones. Innes begins with two main challenges to the existing historiography. First, she points out the inaccuracies in Philip Harling and Peter Mandler's theses about the expansion of the number of statutes and public expenditure in this period. Second, she contests Boyd Hilton's characterization of politics in this period as 'socio-economic liberalism' shot through with Evangelicalism. Innes argues that in many ways, especially in education, public health, and spiritual life, the government did extend its role in some areas between 1780 and 1830. However, overall 'the basic shape of the apparatus of English domestic government did not change much' (p. 91). Rather, we must examine the new ideas that did emerge around the turn of the century, especially concerning 'the state of the people' within a much longer timeframe and set of processes.

Jonathan Parry continues Innes' themes about the changing relationship between local and central government and society. In the period of Innes' discussion of government growth, the Country Whig-Liberal critique of 'Old Corruption' acted as a spur for reform. By contrast, from the Peelite Tory economic reforms of the 1840s onwards, the rhetoric of Old Corruption went into decline. By 1870, the influence of vested interests in the state and its reform had declined significantly. The 'new politics' under Gladstone and Disraeli saw a strengthening of the reputation of the institutions of state, and a weakening of special lobby groups' power to force through reform from outside the government. The chapter, though authoritative, is predominantly based on secondary sources, and it would have been useful to have seen some analysis of parliamentary debates on the changing definitions of reform in government and political practices.

Jon Lawrence rethinks the role of class in Labour Party politics between 1900 and 1940. He argues clearly and straightforwardly that the inclusive politics constructed by the Labour Party was vital to its breakthrough in 1940. He suggests that Labour historians have not recognised that the party's rejection of class politics came much earlier than the constitution of 1918. His chapter is a good example of how to combine traditional structural history with the 'linguistic turn'. Lawrence's attention to language and cultural representation of class is, as he admits, a first for Labour history, even though historians of the Conservative party have already taken this approach.[\(6\)](#)

Alastair Reid and Daniel Pick provide the two more left-field essays in the collection. Reid considers the 'dialectics of liberation', tracing the shift from old left to new left in 1960s counterculture. Pick discusses why historians have mistrusted Sigmund Freud in particular, and psychoanalysis in general. The structure is fluid and occasionally confusing. He chooses various examples of left-wing historians and their rejection of psychoanalysis as a methodology. The most concrete example is Marxist historians of the 1960s and their studies of Luddite machine breaking. Whereas Eric Hobsbawm stated that Luddism was 'simply a technique of trade unionism', Pick contends: 'For how are we to know that no hostility to the machine was involved? Might attacks on machines not be considered (after Freud) as at least potentially "over-determined"?' (p. 227) What I think Pick is getting at is a wider point about crowds being motivated as much by emotion as by the more objective rules of the 'moral economy'. In this, he echoes recent sociological and historical research which brings emotion back into social movements in order to correct George Rude's portrayal of the crowd as overtly rational in their reasoning and actions. Pick has a point when he argues that 'psychoanalysis might cause the historian to hesitate more, not less, before claiming to ... demarcate what

was really going on inside their minds and conversely what was not' (p. 229). However, he does not provide enough examples of how historians are to use such methodologies when faced with the silence of the dead and the layers of text in the archives. The chapter would have benefited from moving beyond the historiography of the mid-20th century, and addressing instead more recent studies both of machine breaking and of emotion in social movements.[\(7\)](#)

Trans-national networks

Anne Summers heads the final theme, trans-national networks. She examines three foreign crises that had a positive impact upon British feminism in the mid- to late- 19th century. She argues that British women's reactions to the Italian unification movement, conflicts between Ottomans and Christians, and the Boer Wars, showed the extent of their empathy and activism for foreign causes. This extent of concern, she argues, dispels the 'orthodoxy' that British feminism was 'dependent on the construction of an inferior and colonised female Other' (p. 188). The chapter is more of a breathless overview than a detailed analysis, especially compared to the tighter arguments of the other essays. The brevity of both the examples and the arguments leave some unanswered questions. First, to what extent were these responses typical? Were they confined to a certain class and milieu, or did they reach beyond the 'Muswell Hill Brigade' down to working-class women? Second, it would have been useful to explain more about the connections between each campaign and the wider feminist movement.

David Feldman's engaging discussion 'Why the English like turbans' uses a case study of the famous Wolverhampton Sikh bus driver case of 1967–9 to explore both the state and society's responses to the evolution of a multicultural Britain from the mid-19th to the late 20th century. He makes a bold case for the relative toleration of England in response to religious diversity. In doing so, he challenges common views about the British reaction to non-white immigration, and that support for multiculturalism was not restricted to the liberal, radical, and left. Feldman makes it clear this is more to do with religious pluralism rather than race. He does not deny the vicious streak of racial discrimination that underpinned many social and political conflicts in Britain. Furthermore, religious toleration was not born out of benign benevolence, but rather was 'designed to preserve English dominance within the United Kingdom, to govern subject peoples within the empire, and to preserve the privileges of the established church' (p. 293). Pluralist policies in response to multiculturalism were therefore meant to preserve the vestiges of the English ancien regime at home and overseas. He ends with some open-ended thoughts about New Labour's response to multiculturalism and its legacy which is still atop the political agenda.

Often edited collections can suffer from a lack of coherence and contributions of variable quality. The usual cause of this is the inevitable 'conference proceedings' volume, where editors desperately attempt to find a common thread to draw the disparate contributions of variable quality together. This collection does not fall into this category. Far from it, *Structures and Transformations* exhibits a clear sense of its purpose and direction throughout, which stand it in good stead for becoming one of those rare edited collections that becomes a staple work in British political historiography. The essays as a whole achieve the editors' goal of combining empirical research with wider attention to the forces and influences shaping structures and discourses about structures. Two omissions deserve further consideration. First, though there is a welcome focus on international connections, little is said about the four nations of the British Isles. Union, campaigns for Home Rule, and devolution are surely key structural transformations that need rethinking within the Stedman Jones' mode. Second, it would be interesting, and indeed useful, to include Gareth Stedman Jones's response to these essays and interpretation of his work.

Notes

1. Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: a Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (Manchester, 1999), p. 297.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: the West and the Rest* (London, 2011).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982*

- (Cambridge, 1983).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760–1830* (Oxford, 2006).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. See for example, Steven Marcus, 'Reading the illegible', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. H. J. Dyos and J. Wolff (2 vols., London, 1973), p. i.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Labour historians are slowly catching up. See Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. For example, Jeff Goodwin, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning and Emotion* (London, 2003); Kevin Binfield, *The Writings of the Luddites* (Baltimore, 2004).[Back to \(7\)](#)

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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