

## The Third Revolution. Professional Elites in the Modern World

**Review Number:**

29

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 March, 1997

**Author:**

Harold Perkin

**ISBN:**

9780415143370

**Date of Publication:**

1996

**Price:**

£75.00

**Pages:**

272pp.

**Publisher:**

Routledge

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.routledge.com/books/The-Third-Revolution-isbn9780415143370>

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Michael Thompson

Harold Perkin has been hailed as 'the Marx of the Salariat'.<sup>(1)</sup> The author of this sobriquet is thanked for his 'infallible intellectual and moral support', so it must be true.<sup>(2)</sup> Now it seems he is to be its Lenin too, for his latest book ends with a reprise of that foundation text, ' *What is to be done?*'<sup>(3)</sup> The distinction of being placed in such company is no doubt tempered by an understandable hesitation over the ability of the new battle cry of professionally enlightened self-interest to rival the recruiting power of the red banner of old. For in this book Perkin has not only gone global, extending his concept of the professional revolution, first adumbrated in relation to England, to a group of seven countries which possibly think of themselves as constituting the essential 'world'; he has also gone incandescent. Naturally the book can be read, and profitably read, as a serious analytical survey of the development of the seven countries since 1945 - with, it should be noticed, a somewhat surprising emphasis from the first professor of social history in Britain on their economic performances - but it can also be read as a manifesto. This becomes explicit in the conclusion, which is addressed to the question 'What then can be done to save the debilitated Anglo-American societies from the same fate as the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe?' and where the rhetoric rises to levels of denunciation which would not have disgraced E.P. Thompson when on the trail of error. The free-marketeers in their hubris and their greed, Perkin writes, 'have committed themselves to laughable theories like the Laffer curve ("lower taxes produce more revenue") when it only produces massive budget deficits, and the "trickle down" theory ("tax breaks to the rich benefit the rest"), a euphemism for "pissing on the poor." There is little hope from them of self-correction and reform. We can only hope that they will run out of gas'.<sup>(4)</sup> But there are plenty of signs in the body of the text that the manifesto element and its polemic are much more than a postscript to a scholarly work: they are integral to its whole structure and purpose,

signalled at the very beginning when 'the triumph of the Thatcherites in Britain, like that of the Reaganites and Gingrich Republicans in the United States,' is described as 'the victory of the private sector professionals over the rest of society', extremely dangerous because of the unrestrained selfishness and greed which it sanctions, which produce 'social pathologies like crime, drug taking, homelessness, mental illness, riots, and rebellion.'<sup>(5)</sup> So the Third Revolution is also about the approaching fourth revolution that may come out of these riots and rebellions, and the prescriptions for averting this revolution are embedded in the analysis, and definition, of the third.

Two for the price of one is a well-recognised consumerist, post-industrial, ploy which could very appropriately be used to promote Harold Perkin's special offer of a global contemporary history and an anti-fat cat campaign document within single covers. The ploy is very successful. up to a point, largely because we are swept along by his command of the post-1945 stories and the cultural traditions of the seven leading professional societies, and because the great majority of his readership will undoubtedly share his deep antipathy to the elevation of unbridled greed into the supreme virtue and driving force of society. The time comes, however, when the history does not seem to have solid enough foundations to carry the towering conclusions it is expected to bear, and the manifesto seems longer on invective than on constructive suggestions

The scheme of the book is to identify the 'three great social revolutions which encompass the whole of human history'<sup>(6)</sup>, to examine the working out of the post-industrial revolution in separate chapters devoted to the seven leading societies - the United States, Britain, France, the two Germanys, the Soviet Union, and Japan - and to conclude with a look at the globalisation of professional society. The first revolution was the Neolithic, enabling the transition from hunting- gathering to farming, which Perkin has not examined personally but which has profoundly impressed him so that the couple of pages devoted to it manage to repeat twice that 'above all, it created history itself', and 'above all, the priests and bureaucrats invented writing, and so made history itself possible.'<sup>(7)</sup> This revolution was indeed of enormous importance, 'a mega- revolution' no less, which created great kingdoms and empires - Sumeria, Egypt, China, Persia, Rome, the Incas, and the Aztecs are mentioned - and on one reading produced the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment before its force was spent. A revolution which lasted for more than 7,000 years was a mighty thing, and so very peculiar that it ought not to be presented as the first in a series. Be that as it may, the second revolution is of course the Industrial Revolution, to whose interpretation Perkin has made a notable contribution and whose revolutionary nature he now upholds against criticisms that it took too long to happen with the observation, most pertinent in the context, that 'in the longer time scale of human history two hundred years is short indeed.'<sup>(8)</sup> The third revolution is, it goes without saying, the post- industrial revolution: but it is worth saying, for in this book it is interchangeably 'the revolution of information technology, automation, "lean production", or, as I prefer, the rise of professional society'.<sup>(9)</sup> This is interesting, since in 1989 professional society was thought to have begun to rise, at least in England, from the 1880s, whereas 'lean production' was definitely unheard of much before the 1960s and nothing much was felt to be post-industrial until the 1970s. Professional society is an elusive concept with a hazy chronology. In the book which so dramatically placed it on the intellectual map the growth of a self-confident, self-regulating, professional class imbued with the idea of public service was the key to the replacement of the market economy of the mature Victorian industrial society by the corporatist welfare state which was firmly established in the 1950s and 1960s, and the backlash against professional society, the revolt of the private sector against big government, regulation, and corporatism, which gathered strength in the later 1970s was seen as marking a reverse for the 'professional society [which] thrived for over a quarter of a century after the Second World War, that is for as long as full employment and a booming economy allowed it to meet all reasonable demands upon it for rising living standards and welfare services. "<sup>(10)</sup> But as with any great text passages can always be found to support different and even contradictory interpretations, and in the Rise this 'reverse' was also identified as a transition from a professional society dominated by public sector and welfare professionals to a more mature professional society controlled by private sector professionals dedicated to a return to the rule of market forces, and the backlash against professional society was revealed to be a conflict between public sector professionals (civil servants, university teachers, schoolteachers, doctors, clergy of the established churches,

BBC broadcasters but not others, and presumably not dentists, lawyers, journalists, artists, writers, architects) and private sector professionals (salaried managing directors and other top executives in business are presented as the principal actors, but presumably everyone else not in the public sector may qualify, since all workers and employees are said to have become professional) a conflict for the possession of the soul of professional society, so that the backlash ingeniously becomes also a forward surge.

In this book also 'the master conflict of professional society. . . is the competition between the public and private sectors over taxation and government spending.(11) Realising that this generalization can hardly be extended to the professional societies of the Soviet Union and East Germany, it is prudently added that the master conflict has been raging 'at least in the West': but on closer examination it figures prominently only in the chapters on Britain, and to a lesser extent in that on the United States - where the private sector professionals enter government service on each change of government and chameleon-like become temporary public sector professionals, thus further confusing the issue - and remains unremarked or unidentified in the cases of France, Germany, and Japan. Although it helps in understanding the breakdown in Britain in and after 1979 of the post- 1945 Butskellite consensus on the mixed economy, welfare state, and full employment, the concept of this master conflict between different professional elites turns out not to be the defining characteristic of the post-industrial world. In practice, somewhat playing down the shared technology which is the fundamental common characteristic of the first world and the aspiration of the second world economies (China might well have been considered here) but recognising the overnight supra-national potential of the giant multinational corporations whose growth has been a central feature of the global economy, Perkin settles for a much looser, more elastic, unifying thread. Any society in which the dominant elite is not recruited by hereditary title, inherited wealth, or personal wealth amassed from entrepreneurial profits, is by definition a professional society. This is a broad definition which nets a mixed catch of fish. The ruling elite may be composed of old style professionals from the liberal professions of church, law, and medicine, or from the newer professions in similar mould which grew from the needs of urban and industrial society - engineers, architects, surveyors, teachers, for example - or from bureaucrats whose special education and supposed commitment to the public service placed them in the same camp, or it can be composed of career politicians, themselves of extremely varied social, occupational, and educational backgrounds, of military people, of the party faithful, of the chief executives and directors of major manufacturing, financial, commercial, and service concerns, people who by and large are 'professional' in the same sense that a professional footballer or cricketer are professional. Indeed, if all post-aristocratic and post-owner-manager societies are to be dubbed 'professional' one wonders whether the term has any more meaning than 'modern' or 'post-modern'.

There is a great deal of sense in lumping together the first world countries, which have had broadly similar experiences since 1945 in steeply rising living standards and converging economies and, a little less certainly, converging cultures. There is much less sense in trying to fit the Soviet Union and East Germany into the same company, being forced to accept the accuracy of their hopelessly fudged and massaged statistics in order to claim that they, too, achieved massive increases in living standards (one table, while acknowledging that the figures are artificial, still claims that GNP per capita was higher, in 1966, in the USSR and East Germany than in Britain, France, or West Germany, a palpable absurdity),(12) saw a massive growth in service industries relative to manufacturing and agriculture, a growth in giant corporations, and took part in forging the globalization of the world economy. These are identified as four of the ten major trends which mark the way in which professional society has transformed society from top to bottom. The other six major trends are the shift from class divisions into a hierarchical structure of society, the move from inheritance and privilege to meritocracy, the incorporation of women into the labour force, the growth of government, the spread of the welfare state, and the expansion of higher education. While the Soviet Union and East Germany definitely participated in these six trends, it was in authoritarian ways which singularly failed to deliver the cornucopia of affluence which is proclaimed as 'the whole point and purpose of professional society(13) so that one is bound to question the logical or historical cohesion of the ten trends as the unitary package or model of the third social revolution. The Soviet Union and East Germany are present in the scheme because Perkin needed a couple of command economies to complete the symmetry of his vision of 'the Great Arch', a spectrum of advanced professional societies stretching from the

United States as the most purely free-market, at one end, to the Soviet Union as the most unfree, pathologically distorted version of bureaucratic professionalism, at the opposite end. An engaging conceit, the Great Arch is an imaginary concept which does not add anything to the serious matter in the book. The Soviet Union and East Germany are best left on their own as failed attempts to use the command economy route to rival the United States in material terms and surpass it culturally.

The ten trends are unambiguously present in the five advanced capitalist countries examined, which is to be expected since the trends have been empirically derived from the experiences of those countries. These five are treated as separate case studies, in what is termed 'a rolling comparison.' (14) This ingenious device in effect means that differences between countries can be ascribed to their different pre-professional histories and traditions, while similarities can be claimed as manifestations of professional society at work. In practice the problems of writing comparative history are dominated by Perkin's inevitable dependence on the existing literature on the seven chosen countries, most of it written on a single-country footing and employing diverse approaches, emphases, and categories, which render controlled comparisons well nigh impossible.

Thus the account of the United States concentrates on the growth of the giant business corporations and their propensity to behave like overmighty feudal barons, and is overshadowed by the looming decline and disaster detected by doomsters in the relative contraction of the manufacturing sector because new technologies have been exported to lower-wage economies 'thus creating domestic depression, unemployment, bankruptcies of satellite firms, and adding to the trade deficit.' (15) The short-termism of the stock market is said to be stifling innovation, and the greed and irresponsibility of the neo-feudal giant corporations whose top executives pay themselves ludicrously gigantic rewards is propelling the U. S. economy towards the point where it will collapse through its gross inequalities and internal contradictions. This analysis seems to ignore the evidence of continuing innovations in the U. S. economy and to brush aside the record of rising per capita incomes, but it does furnish material for direct comparisons with the British case, where short-termism is also held to have inhibited innovations in industry, although it has often been said that the British have made key inventions only to have them turned into successful innovations in the United States. The outrageous salary increases which the likes of Cedric Brown and Sir Iain Vallance have paid themselves, and the general selfishness and greed of the free-marketeers are held to be responsible for Britain's continued, post-1979, decline, although the landed and capitalist ruling elites should take the blame for losing an empire and losing Britain's former industrial and technological lead. (16) 'Britain's decline...is entirely due to the failure of its political and business elites', and it is essentially this 'rather than the obstructionism of British workers. . . [which] lies at the heart of Britain's economic decline.' (17)

The British chapter is focused on this decline, which in this context has been under way since at least the beginning of the century, while that of the United States may, possibly, lie in the future. It is acknowledged that Britain's decline is relative to the more rapid growth of other economies, and that in absolute terms there has been no decline in GNP per capita. By this measure the United States also has been in decline, in relation to more rapid growth rates in France, West Germany, and Japan since 1950, and in Britain since 1960, (18) but this has failed to become the object of consuming interest for economists, and economic and cultural historians to explain, perhaps for the rather obvious reason that the U. S. economy by and large seemed extremely successful until the 1980s. Perkin, in company with many economic and social historians, is obsessed with the problem of Britain's decline. He explains that although Britain pioneered the Third Revolution just as it had the Industrial Revolution (19), it apparently had the wrong kind of society for a good, thoroughgoing, full-blooded, Third Revolution, because the class divisions created by the Second Revolution were too deeply embedded to permit the emergence of a properly effective and meritocratic professional society. A landed, aristocratic, and capitalist hangover, as it were, has held back the British economy in the twentieth century. (20) This is a Wiener-type explanation, complete with the familiar, thinly-based, 'cultural' assertions about the anti-industrial effects of Oxbridge education and the anti-entrepreneurial infection of country-house culture. (21) It is a long-term explanation of a long-term decline, reaching back into that heyday of the Second Revolution when Britain was busily evolving a viable class society. At the same time, however, Perkin seems to want to claim that Britain was doing fine for at least another hundred years, and 'had before the privatizations of the Thatcher era, the most balanced mixed economy, a pioneering

welfare state, and one of the most concentrated business sectors in the free world.(22) What went wrong, according to this version, was the emergence of the master conflict within professional society of private versus public sector professionals (a rivalry also described as being 'curiously backward') and the triumph of the private sector lot in 1979 which has brought on really serious decline by rolling back the welfare state, deliberately increasing unemployment, raising taxation while pretending to reduce it, and ushering in an era of greed, sleaze, and corruption.(23)

This marks the point at which historical scholarship takes a back seat and politics, polemics, and prejudices take over. It is not a point reached in the accounts of France, Germany, and Japan, where exemplary growth records are taken to excuse a certain amount of illiberal, paternalist, and elitist behaviour; each one in turn is credited with creating a model or ideal form of professional society, but in the final analysis it is only the German model, with its apparently well-nigh perfect social market economy, which earns full marks.(24) These chapters, in which the 'master conflict' makes no appearances, are useful surveys of the post-1945 economic history of these countries, with an emphasis on government economic policies, and contain all that a busy businessman may need to know about *enarques*, *pantouflages*, *amakudari*, *yokosuberi*, *jinmyaku*, or the *Leitungsgesellschaft* which is the West German achievement society. Likewise there is no sign of the master conflict in the Soviet chapter, but naturally the *nomenklatura* have a substantial airing, and the paradox of a communist economy imploding because its privileged and grasping elite appropriated for itself more surplus value than actually existed is duly savoured. What all seven countries, except Germany, are found to have in common are greed and corruption, from the wholesale fraud, embezzlement, and bribery practised by Soviet *apparatchiks*, through the systematic bribery of Japanese politicians by the big corporations, and the apparently general corruption in French local government contracts, to the more 'legitimate' but dubiously ethical machinations of junk bond merchants in the U. S. or take-over conmen in Britain. This is attributed to the professional elites who are 'good servants but bad masters'(25), and when they have power are liable to abuse it, exploit the masses, and line their own pockets. At this point one cannot help concluding that there is nothing new under the sun, that ruling elites or cliques have always been tempted to enrich themselves, and that corruption, even blatant and very large- scale corruption, is not an invention of professional society. The infinitely rapacious emperor Bokhassa, who managed to appropriate personally a significant fraction of the pitiful GNP of his impoverished country, might be an example of contemporary corruption on a colossal scale achieved without benefit of professional society.

It is the sight, sound, and smell of corruption which ignites Perkin the crusader. Since everybody is against sin and most right-minded people are against the particular sins which attract Perkin's attentions, his mission is likely to be sympathetically received. He is against the fat cats who help themselves to gigantic incomes and golden handshakes while whittling away the social security support of the poor. 'The excessive greed of some ruling elites is remarkable to behold,' he observes, 'as they simultaneously downsize their workforces, cut the wages of those who remain, reduce the security of tenure of everyone but themselves. . .and disrupt the career ladders which were the chief difference between the secure middle class and the declining percentage of manual wage earners...In a word, the top professional elites are trying to deprofessionalize the employed professions.(26) There are hints here of a sectional complaint from the salariat, or even echoes of a time when the President of the Association of University Teachers was busy defending academic tenure. The culprits are then narrowed down to the American and British elites, since the Japanese, French, and German ruling elites have not yet forfeited the trust of their societies and are unlikely to abuse their power grossly.(27) But with 'the flaunting of excessive wealth. . .the homeless beggars on city streets, the rising waves of crime, drugs, and violence met only by hysterical demands for more prisons and more draconian punishments' it is clear that 'the experiment under the Reagan-Bush and Thatcher-Major regimes with the deregulated free market has done more harm to their economic growth than either Hitler in the Second World War or Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev in the Cold War.'(28) The question becomes how to save America and Britain from collapse.(29) The obvious answer would seem to be to get rid of Reagan- Bush, which has been done (except that the appearance of Newt has been noted as a setback)(30), and of Thatcher-Major, only half accomplished. But instead of ending his book with a rousing call for one more heave to get rid of the Tories, and a summons to vote New Labour, or possibly Liberal Democrat, Perkin retreats into a coyly ineffectual academic shell, announcing that we must all strive to be like Germany, or perhaps Japan,

and that the only way to do this is to hope that the big bad free-marketeers will 'run out of gas', after which America and Britain can 'save themselves by cashiering the free-marketeers' which will not be easy since they are in control of most of the media and most of the state apparatus.[\(31\)](#) After this conjuring trick has been performed a new regime is to put back the clock to ensure that the producers of real goods are rewarded while speculators, take-over raiders and arbitrage merchants are squeezed out, measures are taken to see that no one of working age is allowed to be idle, beggars are treated as truants, the unemployed are set to work on maintaining and improving the material infrastructure, and a high-wage, high-consumption economy is established.[\(32\)](#)

The denunciatory part of this political manifesto is congenial enough, but the constructive elements, a weird mixture of physiocratic prejudices and hankerings after a German-style social market economy, are unconvincing, while the guide to political tactics is no more than a wish-list and is definitely not worthy of a Lenin. These are not solemn and illuminating pronouncements which need to be taken seriously by students of contemporary affairs, but they will certainly repay attention by providing entertainment as well as instruction. As to the globalization of professional society since 1945, with which much of the book is concerned, professional society is so loosely and elastically defined that this process may well have occurred. Certainly there will be general agreement with Harold Perkin that the cultural as well as the economic and technological convergence of the advanced industrialised countries since 1945 needs to be studied, and one can but hope that his warning that the greed and corruption of their elites may lead to self-destruction will be as generally heeded.

## Notes

1. David Marquand, on dust jacket of Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society* (1989). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. p. XVii.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. pp. 202-18.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. p. 211.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. p. xiv.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. p.2.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. pp. 2-3.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. p.4.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. p.6.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Perkin, *Rise of Professional Society*, p.472.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. p.10.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. p.9.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. p. 187, where the definition of the purpose of professional society is extended to the provision to everyone of 'the full range of satisfactions once open only to the rich and powerful, and many that were unavailable to anyone before the late twentieth century', including satellite television and jet flights to exotic destinations.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. p. xv.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. p 47. [Back to \(15\)](#)
16. pp. 68,72, 75.[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. pp. 75,72.[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. Table 1.1, p. 9, and p. 46.[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. p. 49.[Back to \(19\)](#)
20. pp 62-3.[Back to \(20\)](#)
21. Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (1981). [Back to \(21\)](#)
22. p 49.[Back to \(22\)](#)
23. pp 66-7 70-2.[Back to \(23\)](#)
24. pp 121-2, 175, the French version is indirectly accorded this status by the claim that the French and Japanese societies 'are remarkably similar in their values and goals', p. 81.[Back to \(24\)](#)
25. p 175.[Back to \(25\)](#)

26. p 188.[Back to \(26\)](#)
27. pp. 189-90.[Back to \(27\)](#)
28. p 209.[Back to \(28\)](#)
29. p 211.[Back to \(29\)](#)
30. p XIV.[Back to \(30\)](#)
31. p.211.[Back to \(31\)](#)
32. pp. 212-16.[Back to \(32\)](#)

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/29#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/305>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>