

Les Origines de la révolution industrielle aux Etats-Unis: Entre économie marchande et capitalisme industriel, 1800–1850 [The origins of the Industrial Revolution in the United States: Between market economy and industrial capitalism, 1800–1850]. By *Pierre Gervais*. Paris: Editions EHESS, 2004. 347 pp. Tables, maps, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Paper, €30.00. ISBN: 2-713-21825-X.

Reviewed by François Furstenberg

The literature on the Industrial Revolution presents something of a puzzle—at least to the relative outsider. Economic historians clearly have a sense that *something* important happened between 1750 and 1850, but what exactly that might be, much less why it occurred, are deeply problematic questions. It would seem impossible to make sweeping statements about the Industrial Revolution; timid assertions reign. Into this vexed terrain steps an intrepid voice with an ambitious project. Pierre Gervais is extremely well versed in the historical literature on the period—not just in the United States but also in Europe—and he brings a wonderfully international, or at least North-Atlantic, perspective to bear on what turns out to be, notwithstanding its title, a very local study.

Gervais is unimpressed with classic explanations for the origins of the Industrial Revolution—technological innovation, increases in productivity, transformations in managerial organization, and so forth. Rejecting these, he conceptualizes the Industrial Revolution as a shift from a “market economy”—composed of merchants and independent producers—to a “capitalist economy”: industrialized and built on wage labor. Only when the market economy collapses of its own internal contradictions does a “rupture” occur, opening a space for the emergence of the wage-laboring class and ushering in the Industrial Revolution. It is thus the collapse of the old order that has to be explained, rather than the rise of the new, and so Gervais devotes much of his study to an examination of this market economy and of its internal contradictions.

Gervais's market economy is composed of two "irreducibly opposed" classes (p. 39): monopolistic merchants versus independent producers. The merchant class seems particularly to fascinate Gervais, as he dwells on it at length. Gervais's merchants form a "structurally dominant" (p. 32) "class" that, due to its "solidarity" (pp. 39, 125, 210, *passim*), is able to exercise monopolistic control over access to markets, thus "paralyzing" (p. 124) the invisible hand of the market, which should have been able to rectify such profiteering. Under the old order, these monopolistic merchants exercised "unlimited economic domination" (p. 36) over the independent-producer class, whose mode of production remained firmly fixed on the household model. Unlike so many other historians, Gervais is not interested in whether those producers exhibited a capitalist *mentalité*. Instead, he seeks to show that the *merchant* class did not have a capitalist outlook, as they aimed for "monopolistic superprofit" (p. 38) rather than for efficiency or greater production.

To prove his case, Gervais focuses on the central New Jersey corridor between Philadelphia and New York, a region whose agriculture was already highly commercialized at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and whose manufacturing and transportation sectors experienced important technological innovation. This region seems to have been selected in order to show that, even in this propitious context, new technologies did not usher in the Industrial Revolution. Quite the contrary: they were incorporated into the already existing structures (especially of subcontracting) that characterized the old market economy, and they only strengthened the old order, at least in the short term. Gervais examines the most prototypical of technological advances—the steam-powered locomotive, which benefited from important innovations in central New Jersey—to show that technology and new forms of transportation were entirely swallowed up by older "precapitalist" merchant practices and did not in and of themselves lead to new economic practices, still less to a new economic *mentalité*. Only when the "attitudes of economic agents underwent revolutionary transformation" (pp. 115, 232) would the Industrial Revolution finally occur.

So what caused this shift? According to Gervais, it was the *salarariat*—wage laborers—that ultimately finished off the old market economy. Strangely, given its

importance to Gervais's framework, the salariat makes a late appearance in this study, while its social composition and ideological outlook remain essentially unexamined. Without offering much evidence, Gervais argues that the move to the salariat represented an "act of economic resistance," a "conscious decision by numerous participants in the market" to "rejec[t] . . . the market economy" (pp. 236, 253, 236). The new capitalist order made it possible for producers to "break the merchants' control of the market economy," and the salariat was in this sense "a movement of revolt against the merchants" (p. 236). Alas, the precise mechanisms by which this revolt occurred, as well as the details of the transformation of independent producers into salaried workers, remain largely unexplored. The author is content to return to the central theme of the study: the tenacity of the disappearing market economy as it collapsed in upon itself.

This book offers a well-researched and fearlessly argued interpretation of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, and in this respect it should prove a welcome addition to the literature. One might wonder about its tendency to come to startlingly sweeping conclusions based on somewhat fragmentary evidence and quibble with some of its arguments—I found myself, for instance, wondering about the alleged unity of this merchant "class," which, if set in the larger social and political context of the early republic, might well have been more fractious. The success with which it supposedly dominated other classes in the early republic also seems debatable to me: if Gervais is right about the monopolistic position of this merchant class, "assured" of its superprofits (p. 129), how to explain the very frequent bankruptcies of these merchants, including the wealthiest and most well connected—a phenomenon noted by many foreign travelers, including French visitors, as they marveled at the entrepreneurial nature of the early republican United States—long before the internal contradictions of the market economy became untenable? What is more, the evidence offered in the study suggests that the Civil War may well have played a more decisive role in destroying the old economic order than Gervais acknowledges. Which, if true, would only have strengthened his case against the workings of the invisible hand, and of technology, in ushering in the Industrial Revolution.

Notwithstanding these quibbles, Gervais has provided what is surely the premier French-language study of the coming of the Industrial Revolution to the middle Atlantic. It will no doubt provoke further questions, and it should offer food for thought to readers the next time they travel the New Jersey Turnpike from Philadelphia to New York, driving alongside the dramatic remnants that so vividly evoke the state's once glorious industrial past.

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