

Tom Burns
Organisation and Social Order

PART V

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

What Karl Polanyi called the 'Great Transformation' was made up of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. I have added a third: the Organisational Revolution.

Of the three, the Industrial Revolution was the most powerful and far-reaching. Beginning in England two generations before it started up in Europe, it changed national economies, and eventually the international economic system, out of recognition; it created new kinds of machines, new products, new and far more destructive weapons of war, and new forms - and aspects - of dependency, misery and deprivation. But its greatest effects were felt after the other two had made their impact on France, to begin with, then Germany and other parts of Europe.

The promise and the threat contained in the French Revolution remodelled political systems; the principles of meritocratic bureaucracy were adopted for application to economic, political and social institutions. In conjunction the three revolutions refashioned the structure of society.

Yet these other revolutions were not connected in any logical or practical sense with the Industrial Revolution. In fact, any direct effect the French Revolution had on the process of industrialisation ran counter to it; and meritocratic bureaucracy played its full part in the advance of industrial capitalism only after it became caught up in the growth of big business and absorbed in large part the quite separate establishments created in the nineteenth century by professionalism.

Varied as the transformations were that were taking place within the national economy of Britain during the eighteenth century, each had its connections, some of them close, with the others, so that together they created a single, tidal, movement. To call this particular aspect of the Great Transformation a revolution is in fact singularly inappropriate. As Finley has remarked, a process of change which went on for more than a century, and which did not bring about a violent change in the social or political order can hardly be given the same label as the French, or the Russian, Revolution.¹ Finley had in mind the label of 'Roman Revolution' that Mommsen and Syme had applied to the period of civil war and conspiracy that ended the Roman Republic and established the Empire, but the remark is still more justified when it comes to the title applied first by Blanqui to the process of industrialisation initiated in Britain during the previous three generations.

¹ M.I.Finley, "Revolution in Antiquity", in R.Porter & M.Teich (eds.) *Revolution in History*, C.U.P., 1986, p.49.

Individually and collectively, the principal performers, from princes to paupers, kept their positions relative to each other throughout. Neither the political system nor the structure of power and social status were much affected. Political power stayed very much where it was at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

There were nevertheless winners and losers.

Bankers, stock-jobbers, politicians, place-holders, and lawyers got richer; merchants, millwrights and tradesmen did well. Those who moved into industrial production on the larger scale which was becoming feasible found themselves confronted with bigger, if not novel, problems of transporting materials and goods, and of housing, provisioning, and disciplining their workforce. There were also difficulties about patent rights and about buying, constructing, and attending to new kinds of machinery, although these were matters they could leave to attorneys and skilled craftsmen. But aside from this their working lives were taken up with the kind of business with which they had been familiar - with buying, selling, dealing with banks, keeping an eye on debtors and creditors, looking after their property and machinery, and managing their workers. For them, the new industrialism was not especially revolutionary.

Things were different for the vast majority at the lower end of the social scale. It was the men, women and children who were recruited into the new industrial workforce whose lives were indeed revolutionised. Work in factories meant twelve hours or more for six days a week of unremitting work in confinement and under factory discipline. From the 'de-regulation' of the traditional rights of workpeople in 1703 and the Black Acts of George I's reign to the Enclosure Acts and the Corn Laws of George III's and the prohibition of collective bargaining over wages and conditions of work of 1799, political power had been used increasingly to tighten and enlarge the property-rights and the properties of the wealthy and to curtail the legal and traditional entitlements of the poor. Labourers and cottagers lost out, their legal as well as what Steven Watson calls their 'moral' rights² ignored. The factory changed the environment, the mode of living, and the prospects of ordinary working people out of all recognition, along with their attitudes, values, opportunities and constraints, and their everyday style of life.

This was especially, disastrously, true of the poorer sort. The predicament of the labouring poor was not just a matter of the level of wages and the cost of living. Two sets of circumstances served to make things worse, in that they stood in the way of even attempts at effective remedy. Both sets were in principle and actuality extraneous to the situation; one stemmed from the combined demographic and economic theory propounded by Malthus, the other from the fear that protests and claims for betterment by working people were either inspired by or contained the seeds of Jacobinism and revolution.

Of the two it was the first which made the deepest impression on the condition of the poor. Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published first in 1798 and then, greatly enlarged, in 1803, set out to refute Rousseauist hopes for the future by pointing to

² S. Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760-1815*, O.U.P., 1960, p.521.

a tendency, amounting to a natural law, for population to increase faster than the means of subsistence. The first Census of 1801 confirmed the suspicion that population was growing at an unprecedented rate; it also seemed to validate the Malthusian thesis which made starvation the only realistic limit to population growth and consigned the poorer sort of people perpetually to subsistence level. Indeed, Malthus' ideas led to the disarticulation of liberal humanitarianism from the liberal political reform movement. Whig reformers sided with the still powerful landed proprietors (who paid the poor rate, as they paid the income tax, which was assessed on property) to oppose 'outdoor' relief as only making things worse in the long run, as the Speenhamland system made all too clear to those who paid for it. It was the Whig reform government which passed the New Poor Law of 1834, which put an end to Speenhamland³ and to the provision of any kind of poor relief.

II

Although the Revolution itself was contained within France, what was done there became a model for other European people to follow, or to challenge, or to learn from and amend: after 1789 no European country could remain indifferent to revolution, or to the revolutionary idea.

But this was by no means the end of it. Out of the Revolution came the Revolutionary Wars, begun as what would now be called a preemptive strike against the armies assembled by Austria and Prussia in order to restore the *ancien regime* in France - and to protect it in their own territories. Working in tandem with the Revolution, the wars which ensued as its consequence turned France into an organised state, with its human and physical resources mobilised so as to create the most formidable military machine Europe had experienced since the Roman Empire. This too became a lesson which the rest of Europe learned and came to interpret in different ways. In combination, revolution and war gave the decisive shove which sent the countries of western Europe irreversibly on the road to what we know as the modern nation-state.

Here again, France was first. The stages of the transformation seem clear enough. It was in France that the people realised themselves as the French 'nation', "the body of citizens whose collective sovereignty," in Hobsbawm's words, "constituted a state which was their political expression."⁴ As the revolution spread, the destruction of the old regime became accomplished fact, and a new France began to emerge, popular support was translated into 'patriotism'.

The beginning of the Revolutionary Wars opened up a new phase. No sooner had the country rallied sufficiently to contain the invaders in the north than it found itself contending with new threats, this time from widespread dissent and open revolt within

³ The 'Speenhamland system', so called after the name of the parish in which it was first introduced, in 1797, was an emergency measure to relieve distress among agricultural workers and their families by providing a supplement to their wages out of the poor rate. It was adopted in most counties which were largely agricultural and persisted until the 1830's. It is properly construed as a subsidy to farmers, who were able to keep wages down to about two-thirds of the means - tested subsistence level.

⁴ E.J.Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, C.U.P. 1990, pp.18-19.

France. 'Patriotism' now became identified with the elimination of internal opposition to the revolutionary government as well as with the defeat of armed invasion. Success in both endeavours was achieved by 'the nation in arms' - by sheer numbers of men fortified by patriotic enthusiasm and supplied by a civilian population through requisitioning and a system of national production.

Organisation for war in these terms and the military success it achieved led into a third stage. The turning point came during the years of the Directory, from 1795 to 1799. Patriotism turned into militant nationalism, first under a fairly transparent cloak of republican proselytising and then as naked conquest. Ten years after 1789, France had become a nation mobilised, organised and commanded by a government which acted in the name of the people of France but owed little or no responsibility to them, justifying its actions, when necessary, by the exigencies of political and military necessity.

From now on, the mobilisation and direction of the nation became increasingly under the autocratic authority claimed in the first place by groups of politicians and then exercised with full effect by Bonaparte. To do so involved the creation of a centralised, homologous, professional system of administrative control of the whole country down to the level of departments and commune.

III

There seems little point in adding one more to the pile of cost-benefit analyses which historians have so often felt obliged to attach to the record of the French Revolution. Whichever calculus is applied - political, economic, or moral - the outcome depends almost entirely on the time-scale chosen; spans of two, ten, or twenty-five years will yield quite different results, as will spans of forty, sixty, eighty or a hundred.

On the other hand, those who had survived those ten years of revolution, or the fifteen years of dictatorship which followed them, with any degree of success had in fact perforce to change their assessment of the costs and benefits of the events and situations they had come through - at least so far as their publicly expressed judgments and public conduct were concerned. More to the point, the values entering into their moral, political or social judgment of people and events - or, again, the public expression of them - had been subjected to constant revision. And if we accept that each of these stages of revision had a bearing, direct or indirect, on the course of action pursued by those in power, then the changes in evaluation and sentiment mattered a great deal.

For those who lived on to enjoy the fruits of imperial conquest, the gains were manifest. The French Revolution occurred because the circumstances in which very many people lived had become unendurable and they sought power to change them. Whether this was or was not the detonator which started off the sequence of changes the Revolution brought in its train, it was the key to understanding them. A set of people had seized supreme power and, eventually, absolute sovereignty, who were wholly different from those who had previously held it. What is more, the transfer was accomplished by recognisably political processes; power was ceded by the previous holders of power to

new men whose authority was acknowledged by the vast majority of their countrymen and so given a new and unchallengeable legitimacy. The demolition of the *ancien regime*, the commitment of the whole country to enlistment in the army or supplying it, the fostering of nationalism which went with it, and the construction of 'the administrative state' were also political acts, in that they were carried out by the legislature and made accomplished fact by agents working under its direction.

Not that their outcomes were confined to the political system. The everyday life and the organisational and institutional arrangements of the country - economic, social, cultural, legal and religious - were drastically redirected or altogether reconstructed. Consequential or concomitant changes included the redistribution of landed property, the secularisation of public life, a new and more equitable system of justice, an enormous acceleration in social mobility, the liberation of internal trade and the labour market, and many more.

But the price was high, if those who survived had any memory of the purposes of the Revolution as they were declared and taken to be when it started. The people of France, declared sovereign, one and indivisible to begin with, were yet for the best part of the lifetime of the First Republic more divided than they had been since the miseries of the *Fronde*. The political and civil rights of full citizenship claimed by and on behalf of the propertyless as well as all others at the outset were whittled away and eventually extinguished. Apart from a brief interval, those in power acted as if they were indifferent to hunger and privation among the labouring poor. There were profound failures, like the virtual bankruptcy of the state and the total neglect of education. Powerful vested interests founded on wealth or office appeared on the scene to take the place of those founded on social status. The acquisitiveness of speculators in assignats and property went unchecked.

Over and above such imperfections and failures in what had been accomplished, there were also the negative achievements and the disasters: civil war, the terror, and immersion in a war with virtually every other country in Europe. In popular memory, at least, the demolition work of the first years, the terror, and the heterogeneous and vengeful conflicts of the civil wars were vivid enough to overshadow any successes of institutional reconstruction.

What redressed the balance for the French people was military victory - and the spoils of war. And here too there was a price to be paid - nothing less than the surrender of the sovereignty claimed in the first place for the people, then for those - fewer and fewer in number as the years went by - who claimed to be its representatives, and eventually to one man.

The price paid also included the replacement of the generous patriotism of the early years by militaristic nationalism. On the face of it, this last change simply reflected, or was reflected in, the sentiments of those who lived through it. The 'patriots' of 1789 were people looking for popular support in their mission to redeem France by the creation of a liberal constitution and liberal institutions. Barriers of status, privilege and wealth were to be demolished in the cause of affirming the universal brotherhood and natural equality of

mankind. It was an affirmation which the Assembly, in its declaration of 1790, applied to all peoples and, in the same spirit, abjured any war of conquest. Nor was this empty rhetoric. When the Assembly approved proposals for the union of Avignon and the Venaissin, and, in 1792, of Nice and Savoy, with France, they were incorporated in a decree which made the union subject to formal acceptance by the people by means of plebiscites - which in general, according to Cobban, were conducted "with remarkable impartiality."⁵

Ten years later, the Directory, with Sieyes and other prominent figures of the earlier revolutionary years in control (Bonaparte himself had been a serious, though unknown, supporter, of the Revolution), imposed republicanism and the French administrative system on Belgium, southern Germany, northern Italy, and Switzerland. France helped itself to booty and tribute in the guise of large-scale requisitioning, confiscation, and reparations.

This was only the beginning. A French hegemony which lasted fifteen years was established by force of arms over most of western Europe. Yet while conquest and military occupation were the precondition of that hegemony, the effective instruments were cultural imperialism and a new system of government administration founded on trained and proven competence, factual information and total subordination to central authority.

V

The cultural imperialism of Napoleon's Europe owed something to the aesthetic, cultural and intellectual leadership France had won for itself in Europe since the days of Louis XIV, but it had a structure and an ideology entirely its own. Under the slogan, 'civilisation and progress', France set out to integrate Europe, much as the early 'patriots' had sought to integrate France under the slogan of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'.

Stendhal's raptures, in the first chapter of the '*Chartreuse de Parme*', over the joyous reception by the Milanese of the French occupying forces in 1796 are hard to stomach, in view of what the French did to the Italian people afterwards, but they do convey the kind of feelings that those who, like him, had themselves served directly in the Napoleonic administration or armies felt they should have aroused among the educated elite of Europe. What is more, there is plenty of testimony to the revelatory and stimulating experience to which the livelier and more ambitious individuals in the territories they occupied were exposed by their involvement in the cultural *milieux* that the French brought with them. Membership of their circles, clubs, academies and societies afforded (or at least promised) a new and invigorating intellectual life; attendance at receptions, dinners and the more prestigious salons brought a flattering awareness of 'belonging' to a glittering, powerful, cosmopolitan elite; and there were the more substantial rewards which distinction in the service of France or the friendship of its notables could bring.

⁵A. Cobban, *The Nation State and National Self-Determination* (rev. edn.), Collins (Fontana), 1969, p. 41.

Yet none of this would have made any very lasting impression without the administrative efficiency which French domination brought in its train. The instrument of European integration under Napoleon was its administrative system. The government of occupied and satellite territories was in the hands of men (often the commanders of the French forces and their staffs), confident in the belief that they had at their disposal a professional bureaucracy - or at the very least, the makings of one. It was made up of new men who had risen by merit (a prerequisite, even though supplemented, inevitably, by opportunism, patronage or nepotism), and were possessed of scientific methods that allowed them to understand and govern the mechanisms of society: statistics, utilitarian principles and administrative science. Their achievement was founded on the compilation of factual information about the resources of men, material, productive capacity and commercial activity available to them in every region and district of the Empire. The same practical knowledge and factual information entered into decisions about the measures needed to put those resources to best use in the service of the Emperor. Only the means they employed to possess themselves of what they needed (or wanted) were customary, direct and often enough fairly brutal - as were the rewards and penalties they handed out to ensure that those measures were properly implemented.

By 1809, twenty years after the start of the Revolution, the territory claimed for France itself was almost coextensive with Charlemagne's, a thousand years before, and neighbouring territories had been reduced to satellite or client status. The First Empire had its ruling class: a reconstructed elite, with Napoleon's brothers and brothers-in-law in position as heads of state in Germany, Italy and Spain, subtended by notables, favoured generals, leading politician and administrators. The elite created by Napoleon was supplemented and reinforced after his marriage with Louis XVI's niece, Anne of Austria, by returned *émigrés*. Even more important, both at the time and for later years, was the emergence of a 'political class' out of an amalgam of politicians who had survived the revolutionary years and functionaries educated and trained in the *polytechniques* for service in the new administrative system.

VI

Five years later, the Napoleonic Empire had collapsed. Simply, what had been won by military conquest and occupation was lost by military defeat. It is during those five years that central flaws begin to be revealed. They carried portents as serious for the future as either the Revolution or the integration of Europe under Napoleon.

While the later years of the First Republic had served as the training ground for the generals, diplomats and administrators who ran the First Empire, the earlier revolutionary years had also left their mark. It was at least as durable and in some ways deeper.

One all-important structural feature of the modern state had been put in position as early as 1789. This was a clear distinction between those with property and those without so far as voting rights were concerned, a distinction which had deepened and widened ten years later until the propertyless were virtually excluded from the right to participate in the political system. As the outlines of the nation-state were filled out during the nineteenth

century, the two nations that it comprised (in more senses than Disraeli had in mind) became more and more clearly defined, and separate. On top were the notables - landed aristocracy and those had managed to buy their way into it; a 'political class' of the well-educated, the professional, the wealthy, with an 'officer-class' closely tied in with it; and the '*fonctionnaires*', the new army of civil servants. Below was the other nation of the propertyless, mostly the labouring and indigent poor but best defined by the convenient all-purpose label of '*administres*'.

There was another kind (or source) of structural division inherited from the revolutionary years which persisted alongside the first, sometimes in parallel and as reinforcement to the first, at other times at cross-purposes with it. The fires of patriotic nationalism which were lit in the first year or two were later almost smothered under old solidarities and loyalties: to religion, to local connections, even to the *seigneurs* who professed the same beliefs - in short, to a sense of belonging rooted in personal experience and traditional knowledge and sentiments shared with kinsfolk and neighbours. There were times and places enough for these to reinforce a deeper-rooted interest: economic, even personal, survival.

A similar sequence was repeated for the Napoleonic Empire. Once again, the disintegrative forces at work were just as mixed: sheer resistance to invasion or conquest by 'outsiders' in Spain and Russia; local or regional loyalties and attachments in Spain and parts of Germany and Italy; stored up or cumulative resentment against their French masters and the depredations and economic burdens they imposed.

This new form of nationalism, it is safe to say, had no significance whatever to the mass of the people either in the satellite states of Germany and Italy or in Prussia, Austria, Spain and Russia. It made an appearance in Prussia, late in the day, as an ideology fashioned by a political elite intent on restructuring the state and the social system in Prussia after the humiliation inflicted on it after Jena. But what Stein, Herdenberg and Gneisenau were able to do was in terms of a limited application of the methods of their adversaries to the reform of the army and the government. Nationalism was invoked to justify their proposals to their own King and to rally support from the officer class, the nobility, the professional classes, and the many bourgeois who had suffered from territorial losses, the requisitions and the penal taxation exacted by the French.

The imprint of the First Empire remained, though, to show more and more clearly through the patchwork legitimacy of the Restoration as the years, decades, and generations passed. Telltale signs show up in the differences in the post-Waterloo settlement of those countries which had been subject to Napoleonic conquests and direct influence and those which lay outside it: Russia and Britain. Spain, occupied since 1808, but which had put up the most lasting and obdurate resistance of all, is an even better indicator. Nevertheless, it is the cultural hegemony established under Napoleon and the administrative efficiency it brought in its train that account for the differences rather than military conquest and armies of occupation. In Germany, Italy, the Low Countries and, of

course, France itself, "the Napoleonic model of administrative integration was to serve as a model as much for the opponents of French domination as for [its] supporters."⁶

⁶ S. Woolf, *Napoleon's Integration of Europe*, Routledge, 1991, p. 243.