

Tokugawa Japan and Industrial Revolution Britain: Two Misunderstood Societies

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Typical middle and high school history textbook depictions of Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868) and the British Industrial Revolution (1780–1860) are often in stark contrast with descriptions by economic historians.

One middle school world history text, for example, describes Tokugawa Japan as follows:

“... In the 1630s, the ruling shogun closed Japan off from the rest of the world”; and, “... Isolation from the world and limited technology helped extend the samurai period until the 1800s, far longer than it might have otherwise lasted.”¹

An economic historian presents a contrasting view: “The popular conception of people living for centuries under a system of picturesque feudalism and suddenly awakened to practical ambitions by the guns of foreign warships is far from the truth.”²

A high school world history textbook presents the following account of the Industrial Revolution: “Although workers’ lives eventually improved, they (British factory employees) suffered terribly during the early period of industrialization. Some reformers opposed such a destructive capitalistic system and advocated socialism.”³

An economic historian offers a different perspective: “Two-hundred years ago, the UK was the first society ever to decisively and permanently solve the problem of protecting people from empty bellies.”⁴

Although the economies of Tokugawa Japan and Britain during the Industrial

Revolution were substantially different, both societies were prosperous compared to most of the rest of the world. Developments in these two economies were critical in forging the historical paths by which Japan and the UK reached their present impressive levels of affluence.

Research that now spans a decade on the school textbook treatment of economic history topics leaves me convinced that if students exclusively rely on textbooks, they will remain ignorant of important factors that made Japanese and British prosperous, including robust private markets, pro-growth government policies, and cultural climates that were conducive to innovation and economic freedom. In the texts, an all-powerful Shogun and a few elite samurai prosper, often at the expense of everyone else. Typical textbook treatment of the British Industrial Revolution focuses upon two developments; widespread new technology and men, women, and children forced to endure horrible conditions in factories. This article is intended to better inform readers of the accomplishments of these two societies and augment, challenge, and possibly correct, conventional text treatments of the topics.

Tokugawa Japan: Commercial Vibrancy and the Way of the Merchant

Japan’s economic success began in the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), an era marked by rising affluence, flourishing commerce, and peace. Tokugawa prosperity rested upon a productive agricultural sector that, despite a few severe food shortages, produced consistent food surpluses. Although the majority of people lived in rural areas, by 1720 a higher percentage of Japanese lived in large cities (5–7 percent of the population) than was true the same year in Europe (2 percent).⁵ Edo, the site of present day Tokyo (with population over a million), was the largest city, but Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagoya were major cities as well.

The Tokugawa government (shogunate) was authoritarian, but not totalitarian, since it shared some powers with over 260 lords (*daimyo*), who played significant roles in governing 75 percent of Japan’s lands and populations, with the shogunate directly controlling the rest of Japan. The first Tokugawa shogun mandated that *daimyo* spend alternate years in Edo, and created a major road system for *daimyo* travel which facilitated trade and national markets. Domestic trade also occurred through the shipments of large bulk commodities such as rice on both western and eastern routes off the coasts of the Sea of Japan and the Pacific. Substantial international trade, addressed later, also

existed. The shogunate implemented a national legal code and the monetization of the economy. An impressive, mostly private, educational system for samurai and commoners contributed to economic success; estimates are that by the end of the Tokugawa period, literacy levels were comparable with the United States and the UK, which meant critical masses of literate merchants and samurai-bureaucrats.⁶

In urban areas, the shogunate granted a few monopolies but left the majority of merchants and artisans alone. Commercial establishments were not heavily taxed, and this gap gave merchants productivity incentives. Large financial houses had branches throughout Japan and small and large retail concerns proliferated; one of the largest, Mitsui, employed over 1,000 people in Edo alone. Private urban firms owned gigantic warehouses for storage of consumer goods.⁷ City dwellers and significant numbers of peasants had disposable income for a variety of leisure activities ranging from reading to theater and tourism. Although heavy industry began in the Meiji period (1868–1912), small and even some larger manufacturing proliferated in cities and rural areas. Daimyo, merchants, and samurai invested in production of sake, soy sauce, silk, paper, and even iron and metal. Some peasant families were earning over half their income from non-agricultural activities.⁸

World history texts largely ignore this economic activity. The middle school text cited earlier has only one reference to the economy, “Early in the period ... Japan traded with other countries...” (p. 459), and asserts that Japan embraced capitalism after World War II (p. 675). The high school text notes the importance of merchants and trade but does not elaborate. Most peasants are depicted as having much grimmer lives than was actually the case. Both books overestimate the shogunate’s powers, and Japan’s international economic isolation. Students need to consider three key points that will improve conventional text treatment.

1. *The government was more decentral-*

ized than texts suggest. The Tokugawa shogunate initially tried hard to achieve absolute power but did not have the military or economic resources to succeed. By the late seventeenth century, lack of funds caused the shogunate to cease annual monitoring inspections of all daimyo’s holdings. The shogunate promulgated numerous regulations on appropriate clothing styles, kindness to animals, and even overeating, but most were ignored as time passed. The inability and later lack of desire of the central government to regulate the economy created ample opportunities for merchants and entrepreneurs. Some daimyo allowed merchants to engage in triangular international trade with Europeans using Okinawa and the other Ryukyu Islands in defiance of Tokugawa seclusion policies.⁹

2. *Tokugawa Japan was not hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world.* As historian Marius Jansen noted, “The famous decrees that closed the country were more of a bamboo blind than they were a Berlin Wall.”¹⁰ The decrees applied primarily to trade with Europeans (with the exception of the Dutch). In the early Tokugawa years, Japan ranked second in the world in silver exports and was a major supplier of copper as well; with the metals going to Southeast Asia and China. After a shogunate precious metals ban that was rescinded, by the mid eighteenth century, Japan resumed these exports at the same earlier levels. Japan imported a wide range of Asian goods throughout the period, including silk, cotton, medicines and sugar.¹¹ Although Japan’s economy would have probably done even better

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASS ACTIVITIES

The Industrial Revolution and Human Well-Being

Access to ample food and cheap cotton clothing are two examples of how industrialization dramatically improved long-term health in the UK. Students can gain a specific understanding of the impact of the industrial revolution on human well-being by the following introductory classroom activity:

Most citizens in countries that have experienced an industrial revolution have much more access to manufactured goods than is the case in countries that have not industrialized. Think about you and your family. In 10 minutes or less make a list of specific manufactured products that make you healthier. Share your list with your classmates. Many African and Mid Eastern Nations have little or no industry. Do follow up research at NationMaster.com or The CIA World Factbook (www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html) to compare life expectancies and infant mortality in countries with little or no industrialization and affluent nations.

Industrial Revolutions: Income Distribution and Inequality

Many poor countries are now experiencing industrial revolutions, which can, but doesn’t always, widen the economic gap between rich and poor in a given nation. NationMaster.com is an excellent online global source with an extensive database compiled from multiple credible sources. Students can do comparisons of countries on a number of topics including income distribution.

A definition of the widely used Gini Index will be helpful for students investigating income distribution. The Gini Index is a measurement of the income distribution of a country’s residents. This number, which ranges between 0 and 1 and is based on residents’ net income, helps define the gap between the rich and the poor, with 0 representing perfect equality and 1 representing perfect inequality.

More information is available at www.investopedia.com/terms/g/gini-index.asp#ixzz2M16MUTgx

with unrestricted European trade, the country in part prospered through international trade.

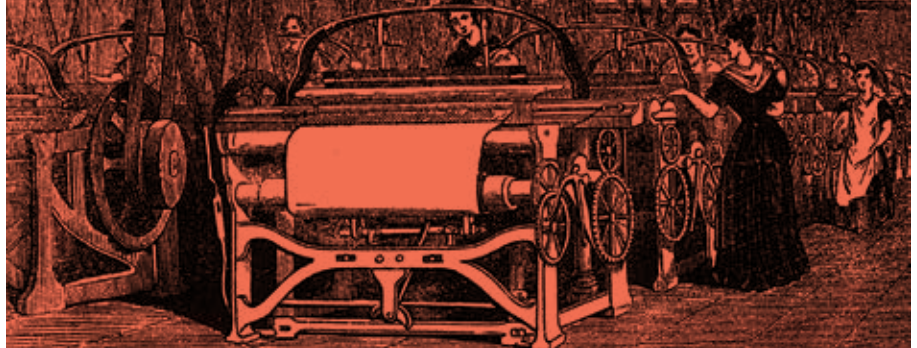
3. *Economic freedom and the activities of merchants should be a vital part of teaching the era.* I have seen no middle or secondary school text where the term “economic freedom” is used in reference to Tokugawa Japan, but significant levels of this liberty existed. Equally important, many merchants, profoundly influenced by Confucianism, worked hard, innovated, and provided quality products for consumers. Officially, merchants were the least respected class in the shogunate-promoted Neo-Confucian hierarchy, but nevertheless, government realized their value and in 1727 granted permission for a merchant academy to open in Osaka. The school became a prestigious center for the study of business and political economy. The most famous Confucian/merchant educator of the era, Ishida Baigan, articulated a proud merchant ethos that worked to improve the lives of many Japanese, “To gain a [honest] profit from a sale is the Way of the merchant. I have never heard that selling at cost is the way.”¹²

The Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, 1780–1860

Japan’s Tokugawa period helped build the foundation for that nation’s current economic prosperity; Britain’s Industrial Revolution changed not only Britain but the world, through initiating industrialization at unprecedented levels. The admitted human costs of the Industrial Revolution notwithstanding, its advent caused the living standards of almost all British people to increase dramatically relative to pre-industrial times. By focusing on rather dry accounts of technological innovations and over-emphasizing the misery of factory workers, world history texts almost never clearly address the major impact of the Industrial Revolution: an increase in human material welfare.

Although their relative importance is debated, some of the causes of Britain’s Industrial Revolution include a pro-

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ductive agricultural sector where better crop yields were created with less labor (freeing workers for other occupations), ready access to coal supplies that fueled factories, access to plentiful international supplies of cotton—the vital raw material for a fast growing textile industry, and entrepreneurship and innovation. Entrepreneurs, who created the leading Industrial Revolution-era industries, textiles and iron, as well as a host of smaller industries producing consumer goods, built urban factories for more efficient mass production and economies of scale savings. Rural people, looking for better lives, flocked to the cities to work in these new manufacturing concerns.

Government also played an important role in the Industrial Revolution through guaranteeing private property rights, institutionalizing a non-arbitrary or confiscatory tax system, and moving toward free trade. A steadily improving economy and political climate characterized by freedom helped to create an ever-increasing respect for commercial and manufacturing middle classes and tolerance of immigrants as well. Freedom and social respect allowed commercial inventors and innovators the latitude to constantly improve technology, which in turned fueled more national economic success.

What critical changes did the Industrial Revolution bring about in the lives of most British people, changes that are

almost never included in textbooks? As noted earlier, virtually the entire population became the first in world history who were assured of an adequate food supply. Previously, the English were like most people everywhere else; their incomes often did not enable them to buy enough food.¹³ Increases in international trade brought food imports and also provided factory workers disposable income that was not previously available to farm laborers. British textile factories produced, for the first time ever, enormous quantities of cheap cotton clothing, which in itself was a revolution of sorts. Easily cleaned cotton clothing was not only comfortable but, in combination with newly mass produced soaps, reduced the transfer of germs from the body to hands and to the digestive tract thus drastically reducing disease.¹⁴ Mass production made goods previously considered luxuries, economical for virtually everyone. All but the most abjectly poor enjoyed products once reserved for a few, ranging from tea and coffee to handkerchiefs and clocks. Ordinary people could regularly eat meat and poultry.¹⁵

The British people, and people in other nations who successfully industrialized, experienced steady rises in income levels. Approximately two centuries ago, the world economy approximated the present level of Bangladesh. Today, real average income, adjusted for inflation, in Britain and other industrial economies exceeds

that of 1800 by about 16 times at the least.¹⁶ In more prosperous industrialized countries people now spend an average of \$100 per day compared to the \$3 a day expenditures of their early nineteenth-century ancestors. The British Industrial Revolution, like those of contemporary China and India, significantly reduced poverty.

The textbook treatment of the Industrial Revolution identifies the middle class as beneficiaries but depicts factory workers as victims. In the teacher's edition of the middle school text cited earlier, the suggested correct answer to the student question, "How did life for factory workers differ from that of the middle class?" is that the middle class earned good incomes and had time for leisure while factory workers "worked long days in dangerous factories for low wages."¹⁷ The high school text, after defining "bourgeois" then describes the middle class as follows: "They had initiative, vision, ambition, and often, greed" (p.620). The book's subsequent description of the industrial working class begins with this sentence: "The Industrial Revolution also created a working class that faced wretched working conditions." Both textbooks emphasize the abysmal conditions of child factory workers, and the only two Industrial Revolution graphics with people prominently feature child factory workers. Dangerous and unsanitary conditions for workers existed in many—but by no means all—factories, but a balanced treatment of the topic is sorely needed for genuine historical understanding. Here are two key points that might help students move toward that understanding.

1. *Over-accentuation of poor factory working conditions in the Industrial Revolution encourages ahistorical thinking.* In the high school textbook quoted at the beginning of this article, students are asked to study a nineteenth-century painting of women and children working in a textile factory and then write a short answer to a question about how they would feel about working in a nineteenth-century factory. Lacking a deep

understanding that things were different everywhere in the nineteenth-century than today, and with no historical context, students will almost surely describe what they perceive as unmitigated disaster, thereby committing the historical error of presentism; judging the past by contemporary standards. No society in 1800, including Britain, possessed enough wealth so that ordinary people could instantly enjoy the working conditions that today we consider a right—conditions that the Industrial Revolution largely made possible through generating enough wealth to pay for factory safety.

2. *Employment and educational alternatives for families who chose factory work were usually better than rural alternatives.* Because of technological advancements in agriculture, fewer people were needed on farms than in the past and in the early nineteenth century. Therefore, it was common for the rural poor to send children to more affluent homes to apprentice in household service for economic survival, thus breaking up families. Farm children usually faced more dangerous and harder work than the light factory work they were usually assigned. Government schooling for the poor was largely non-existent in rural or urban areas. Families that moved to cities for factory work were able to stay together, and received higher pay than what was available in rural areas. The factory was usually a safe place for unattended children when compared to the streets. Children also had better educational and training opportunities in the cities, often in working class Sunday Schools that taught literacy on the weekend, and in factory job training.

Conclusion: Economic History and Civic Literacy

The reasons why there is a lack of attention to economic history in text narratives about not only the two societies addressed in this article, but virtually all societies included in world history textbooks is complex enough to warrant a separate essay. However, for those who believe that the study of history has a

civic function, it is imperative that future citizens in a republic understand economics: a critical and perpetual "public square" issue. One way to do this is through better economic understanding of the past; especially of the question of why some nations became rich and others remained poor. Hopefully this article, and the articles that accompany it, contribute to this understanding. 🌍

Notes

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3. Stanley Burnstein and Richard Shek, *World History* (Austin, Tex.: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 2008), 622.
4. Emma Griffin, *A Short History of the British Industrial Revolution* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.
5. Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2012), xxv.
6. Lucien Ellington, *Education in the Japanese Life Cycle* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 20.
7. *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan, Volume 2, s.v. "The Edo Period Economy,"* (Tokyo, 1983), 149.
8. Ellington and M.A. McCoy, "Economics in World History: Two Success Stories," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 89. Online journal: www.socstrp.org
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10. M.B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 64.
11. D.C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 125.
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13. Griffin, *A Short History of the British Industrial Revolution*, 3.
14. Joel Moyer, *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 161.
15. F.A. Hayek, ed., *Capitalism and the Historians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 137-155.
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17. Burnstein and Shek, *World History*, 647.

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