

Why France Missed Out on Leading the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution was the change in manufacturing that also led to major changes in society. It began in Great Britain even though other countries, including France, had the potential to more quickly develop industrially. Great Britain benefitted from the availability of resources, political factors, technological innovations, financial incentives, and social changes. This is a case study of how historical events are a result of a variety of possibilities going a certain way. Multiple factors are usually involved.

Industrial Revolution ...

The Middle Ages involved a feudal system that revolved around agricultural settlements. The production of goods, manufacturing (industry) of clothing, for instance, was generally small-scale and largely done by hand. The path into the modern era involved the transition to mass production using machine power. This period is known as the "industrial revolution."

Begins In Great Britain

The first industrial revolution spans from approximately 1750 to 1840 in Great Britain, eventually expanding to the United States and throughout the world. The latter stages of this process only were completed in the 20th Century, including in places like China and the Soviet Union. Why did the industrial revolution start in England?

The answer is not that other places lacked the potential. A country like France had the money (capital), natural resources (such as land), and water supply needed. What factors made Great Britain have such a head start? The answers will help us understand why historical events happen in certain places, even though the potential is present elsewhere. It is not just "fate."

Availability of Resources

Great Britain benefited from rich natural resources that are the basic building blocks of an industrial revolution. We learn once more the importance of studying geography.

Great Britain is an island nation located on the Atlantic Ocean. It has many **waterways** that could be used both as a form of power and to carry goods to market. And, the country was well placed to import (send goods out of the country) easily and cheaply by water transportation.

Great Britain also had colonies, that provided **raw materials** (such as wood, cotton, and food). And, it had a growing population. The **population** of Britain grew rapidly during this period, from around five million people in 1700 to nearly nine million by 1801.

Britain had a large supply of coal. **Coal** was an essential part of running the industrial revolution, including the production of iron and steel. This all had a cumulative effect. Coal led to more bridges and factories. Raw materials like wood allowed for the building of ships.

France lost much of its American colonies in the 18th Century. It has a lower quality of coal. France has coastal areas but is more of a part of continental Europe. France became less of a sea power than Britain. Nonetheless, resources alone do not explain Britain's lead here.

Political Factors

The 18th Century was the Age of Enlightenment, which emphasized reason and human development. This included a great burst of discussion of political ideas, which influenced our own push for independence. Britain and France handled this somewhat differently.

Britain, even with the loss of its American colonies, was overall politically stable during this period. They had a well-organized government with a strong belief in the protection of private property. Development thrives on stability and government support.

France was a more elite society. The country was split into three groups, with nobility and the church having special privileges. Popular movements came to a boiling point at a later date. This led to the French Revolution, which itself was a long period of instability that took everyone's focus off other things. A modern industrial state would have to wait.

The **British Navy** was also an important factor. The British had the world's strongest fleet of ships, both naval ships for defense and commercial ships for trade.

Technological Innovations

The invention and improvements of the steam engine by people like the Scottish inventor James Watt were central here. And, improvements in iron making were also very important, including the Bessemer process, providing an inexpensive means to mass produce steel cheaply.

Technological advances allowed Great Britain to exploit existing raw materials such as cotton, providing a chance to lead the way in the industrial revolution. The spinning jenny, for example, provided the ability of one worker to spin multiple spools of yarn.

Again, it was possible that France could have gone ahead faster if things went down differently. A French general was a pioneer in the use of interchangeable parts.

Nonetheless, the British went ahead. French scientists were less practically inclined. The British, with the encouragement of government-supported groups such as England's Royal Society, were more practically minded. This helped the British head start.

Financial Incentives

Industrial development requires money and financial stability. We already saw how political factors helped British industry to get a head start over France.

The British overall benefited from a longstanding skill in financial matters. The joint stock company was a basic means used to establish and run overseas colonies. British banking provided a stable and well-run investment stream.

A sound economy allowed for lower taxes. Note how an increase in taxes, a result of the costs of the French-Indian War, was a major factor in bringing about the American Revolution.

France was less financially savvy. France was a more conservative, agricultural-based society. It had a less developed banking and financial system. It had a less stable tax base, resulting in problems that helped take them on the road to the French Revolution.

Social Changes and Reforms

The end of feudalism and the growth of an industrial economy was a result of hundreds of years of social change and reforms. "Reform" here at times might be in the eyes of the beholder!

Enclosure involved fencing off of land previously held "in common," resulting in a large number of landless people. These people **flocked to the cities**, resulting in a growing base for industry. Cities such as Manchester and Liverpool became major centers of industrial development.

This growth of cities did not take place as much in France. Tradition practices continued, as in Britain, reaffirmed with government policies and social norms. Once the French Revolution came and ran its course (1789-1815), the Industrial Revolution quickly developed in France.

The industrial revolution in Britain brought with it a changing view of society itself. Everything started to become **more impersonal** in cities. Each individual person was more interchangeable, like an interchangeable part of a machine. Feudalism tied a person to the land and set forth fixed roles. Society became more fluid and change was more often expected.

Traditional **religious beliefs** reinforced this. France was largely a Catholic country while Britain underwent a Protestant Reformation. Protestantism has a more individualistic view of religious faith. This fits more in with the capitalistic mindset of the Industrial Revolution.

Conclusion

France had the resources, know-how, and potential that could have led it to be at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution. Britain did have a head start for various reasons. Nonetheless, this is ultimately a case study of the contingency principle.

"Contingency" is a fancy word, but do not let it scare you. The idea is that there are various possible options. Think of a typical time-travel movie where the future is not fixed. If certain things change, the same people and situations can result in very different results.

Our discussion talked about five different things, each of which in some fashion did not necessarily have to go down the way it did. Over time, you will see history is like that.