Why Did the Industrial Revolution Start in Britain?

Was it because they are a particularly ingenious and industrial people or just a happenstance of history?

The Industrial Revolution is widely accepted to have occurred between the 1760s and the First World War. It was a period of time marked by massive technological, socioeconomic, and geopolitical change in the world.

Various reasons have been postulated throughout history as to why the Industrial Revolution began in Britain. But one of the most convincing is the arguments put forward by a Turkish-American economist Daron Acemoglu and British political scientist James A. Robinson in their fascinating book "Why Nations Fail". By their estimation, it is no accident that it began in Britain. But in turn, the very fact Britain had reached a point where it was fertile ground for the revolution is part chance and part cultural development.

In short, changes in history like The Fall of Rome, The Black Plague, signing of the Magna Carta, breaking with the Catholic Church, and the Glorious Revolution, had initially small, but profound cumulative effects over time. In a sense, it can be likened to Chaos Theory where small changes in initial conditions can result in a very different result when all else is equal. Of course, the path of history is not always linear. There had been regressive points in British history before the Industrial Revolution. The Civil War and the following Puritanical tyrannical rule of Oliver Cromwell one of them. However, this did cement the Protestant work ethic in British culture, and more powers had been granted to the British Government from the Monarch in its aftermath. According to Acemoglu and Robinson, once the path had been set for greater rule of law, development of inclusive institutions in society, property rights and lack of fear of creative destruction from ruling classes, the Industrial Revolution was all but guaranteed in the United Kingdom.

According to Acemoglu and Robinson, "inclusive economic institutions… are those that allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make the best use of their talents and skills." But it had been bought and paid for in much blood and political struggle beforehand.

Why did the Industrial Revolution start in Great Britain in the 1750s?

Whilst inclusive institutions were vitally important to allow it to happen, they were not the whole story. Other factors played their part too. The seeds were sown, quite literally, thanks to the agricultural revolution that enabled the production of food surplus and population growth. Almost simultaneously, any excess in labor was attracted to larger population centers in search of work and fortune. Inclusive institutions like the banks of the time could provide capital unimpeded to brave entrepreneurs to build new technologies and companies that they might not otherwise be able to afford to do. Importantly, the rule of law and property rights also promoted investment and risk-taking. Large capital-hungry structures like factories could now be built on credit. The granting of patents was also wrestled from Monarchal whim to a formalized and legally binding system. This further created confidence for investors and inventors to take a gamble.

Britain also happened to have a wealth of coal, iron, and other resources in a relatively small country, that would help kick start the revolution and feed it. It's small, but growing Colonial Empire also provided a ready-made market for surplus goods, providing further impetus to entrepreneurs and new industrialists. Initial developments occurred in the cotton industry with the development of the spinning jenny, flying shuttle and power loom, and very soon, other industries would benefit from industrialization. The world would never be the same again, and all thanks to small, but significant, changes in the course of British history compared to other European nations.

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