

# Parliament and the British Economy, 1750–1850

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Emrah Gülsunar, *The State, Parliamentary Legislation and Economic Policy during the Structural Transformation of the British Economy, 1700–1850* (Lund: Lund Studies in Economic History 2021). 198 s.

In this thesis, Dr Gülsunar explores some of the ways in which economic change in Britain was affected by its parliament. It is partly inspired by the historical work of the new institutional economists, especially the tradition established by the late Nobel Laureate, Douglass North. That approach emphasized the importance of understanding the rules within which economic life took place in the past, particularly the political, legal and cultural conditions around production, distribution and consumption. But Gülsunar has also been inspired by the work of the late Lennart Schön, especially the emphasis he placed upon understanding the adaptability of institutions. Finally, he also builds upon a growing body of work over the last twenty years or so into what the British parliament did, and its availability to society at large, rather than the traditional preoccupations of political and constitutional historians.

An important position that Dr Gülsunar adopts is to prefer the language of "structural change" rather than "industrial revolution" when thinking about what happened to the British economy in the period. In most respects this sits well with work since the 1980s (by E.A. Wrigley and N.F.R. Crafts among others), though it is now generally thought that the structural change of the English economy, much the largest part of the British whole, began no later than the mid-seventeenth century with the dramatic growth of London, already dependent on large supplies of coal, and significant increases in overseas trade and agricultural output and productivity. In practice Dr Gülsunar is mainly concerned with the old periodization of the so-called

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industrial revolution in Britain (1760–1830) and the ways in which the economy became better integrated internally, more mechanized and increasingly internationally orientated.

Methodologically Gülsunar describes his approach as a form of analytical narrative, including the use of case studies, descriptive statistics and analytical and critical thinking. The thesis is economic history mainly written in an accessible way. Two primary sources are at its heart: the acts passed by the Westminster parliament between 1747 and 1832 and records of the debates in the same body over a slightly longer period. Both of these sources have been used by historians for well over a century, but only in the last twenty-five years have they done so more systematically and comprehensively. Gülsunar follows myself, Innes, Bogart and Richardson in undertaking some simple counting and categorizing of acts of parliament, particularly by extending his study beyond 1800 and refining that before then. His use of parliamentary debates is arguably more novel, made possible by the digitization of the original printed source in the last decade or two.

The thesis is divided into five parts. The first, and twice as long as the others, introduces the project, framing it historiographically, methodologically and evidentially. In practice, it also constitutes the conclusion of the thesis, or at least reflects on its general findings as there is no concluding chapter proper. It is followed by four substantive chapters, each resting on different original research. The first is "The Patterns of Parliamentary Public Legislation and the Transformation of the State in Britain, 1747–1832". Mainly this presents counts of acts of parliament, especially those which Dr Gülsunar categorizes as "public" and "economic". This involves modifying how acts were categorized at the time, which until the 1790s simply distinguished between those which were "public" and those which were "private". A danger here is that readers who do not attend carefully to what Dr Gülsunar does might wrongly believe that his category of "public" is the same as that used at the time – which is why Innes and myself preferred to distinguish between acts that applied generally across society from those which were specific to particular places or persons. Be that as it may, the chapter shows that acts concerned with the economy grew on trend from 1747 to 1815 and then declined, with the rise after 1760 said to constitute a second "legislative revolution" – the first was 1688 to 1714. Three main causes are posited: major wars, industrialisation and the union of Britain and Ireland in 1801, involving the abolition of the Dublin parliament, though the last does not get much discussion in the thesis.

The second chapter resting on original research is "Carrying the Leviathan: Turnpike Roads and the Precocious Rise of State Capacity in Britain, 1700–1832". This is the most econometric part of the thesis, centring on a

regression analysis to test statistically the importance of the growth of turnpike roads to the British state's fiscal capacity in the period. This builds upon an extensive secondary literature about the wider importance of such toll roads, in the context of arguing that Britain's fiscal capacity only became distinctive internationally after c. 1750. Gülsunar argues that improved roads after then meant the state "could send not just its tax collectors easier and faster to the different parts of the country to increase its revenues during this period, but also its soldiers to quell rebellions, judges to dispense justice and mail coaches to send letters." But this is not fleshed out and needed to be put against what we already know about the geography of tax collection, rebellions and the administration of justice, in the context of important changes in tax policy that are not considered. As it is, the regression shows that turnpike roads were much less important than war pressure and urbanisation in helping to explain the growth of the British state's fiscal capacity.

"Making Growth Sustained: British Parliament's Legislation and Policy on Cotton Textile Industry and the Motivations Behind Them During the Industrial Revolution, 1747–1815" is the third main research part of the thesis. In recent years there has been renewed emphasis placed upon the importance of the cotton industries to Britain's industrialization after 1760. They have tended to do so in terms of understanding the role of labour (free and unfree, male and female, and adult and child), wage rates, technology, overseas trade and empire. In 2017 William Ashworth drew on some of this literature to assert the significance of the British state in the process, without ever articulating carefully the causal connections at work. It is one of the strengths of this chapter that Dr Gülsunar provides more detail and has a better sense of the dynamics at work within the British state. In part the chapter rests upon the legislative record, where it is shown that there were 64 acts of parliament passed between 1747 and 1815 relating to the cotton industry. Of these, 35 concerned foreign trade and duties – distinguishing between the two is impossible – twelve related to internal taxation, five to the protection of machines from machine breaking "Luddites", five to quality of production and frauds, four to other labour issues and three to property rights. Collectively these are judged to have provided just the right balance of regulation, protectionism and benign taxation for the cotton industry to flourish.

Such findings lead Dr Gülsunar to conclude that the British parliament was more fully engaged with encouraging economic growth than many other legislative assemblies in Europe at the time. As he notes, this is somewhat surprising given that it was a parliament dominated by landowners who might have been expected to have been unsympathetic to the needs of industry and commerce. He argues that in practice parliamentarians were

motivated by several general factors that made them much more open to the needs of sectors other than agriculture. Firstly was a wish for social order without having to resort to intrusive policing. Second, a concern with international competitiveness, though this was certainly a concern embedded in many other states in Europe. Third, with the ways in which lobbying and interest group politics played out in practice, such that businesses were able to get their voice heard in parliament. Finally, building upon Joel Mokyr's work, the importance of "enlightened" mind-sets. This presents a more subtle view of the political workings of British capitalism than to be found in some influential works.

The final part of the thesis is "A Fusion of Economic and Geopolitical Motives: British Policy-makers and Imperial Policy towards the Ottoman Empire, 1791-1848". This explores British policy towards the Ottoman Empire, climaxing in a free trade deal in 1838. As such it provides a case study of wider developments in British commercial politics at the time. Given that foreign policy was formally the preserve of the executive rather than the legislature there is less room in this chapter for interrogating the significance of acts of parliament, though that is done. Rather, Dr Gülsunar looks for the interplay of interests and motives to be found by references to the Ottoman Empire in the parliamentary debates. He charts rising interest in parliament with it after the 1790s, with the focus of attention moving from economic towards geopolitical factors. In doing so he engages with the idea of informal empire and stresses the role of manufacturing interests rather than, as Cain and Hopkins powerfully argued, financial ones. This is an important argument.

This final chapter of the thesis is thought provoking, but in places rests on shaky foundations. A misstep is taken by assuming that the printed debates (produced by Cobbett for the period to 1803 and Hansard thereafter) are official, full and verbatim records. In fact, both were commercial undertakings in this period. Debates were written down not by officials but by external reporters, famously by a young Charles Dickens, who sought to make a living from printing them for the wider public. Consequently, they printed debates that they judged to be of some wider interest, but not everything: they are far from complete and what was said was not always printed – because of mishearing, poor notation or subsequent editing. (Some historians have instructively compared two different reports of the same debate to show up the differences.) Consequently, Cobbett and Hansard need to be used with more qualifications than is provided here, though that does not mean that findings presented are necessarily wrong or misleading. However, whether the distinction that is drawn between economic and geopolitical factors is as clear as is supposed might have been pondered further.

As a whole, this thesis makes a useful contribution to understanding the relationship between state and economy in Britain at the time. Economic history is rather Janus like, facing both economics and history. Dr Gülsunar approaches things more as an economist, but his economics is humanistic and historically aware, keeping theory and statistical wizardry under strict control. The thesis is ambitious in scope and in argument. It rests on a significant amount of research in printed sources. It is well structured and the exposition is clear and effective. Among many particular points, it makes three particularly important interventions. First by exploring the patterns of legislation after 1800. Previously attention had focussed on the eighteenth century, but by bringing this later period into the discussion allows the nature of structural change in the classic period of the industrial revolution to be confronted more directly. Second, the chapter about the cotton industry is especially effective. There Dr Gülsunar's method works best and pays the most dividends, not least because it significantly qualifies some influential recent works. Finally, an important position is taken by moving beyond a preoccupation with the origins of the economic transformation in Britain. As is well shown, a key feature was the way in which parliament in particular and the wider state more generally adapted to changing circumstances, at home and abroad, such that by 1850 Britain clearly, if relatively briefly, had the leading industrial economy of the day.