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TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT: OPPOSITION TO THE RAILWAY IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

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In Book 6 (chapter 56) of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot presents a scene in which the citizens of the hamlet of Frick set upon a group of railway surveyors, “the enemies of mankind”, with hayforks. The surveyors escape with their lives only through the intervention of Caleb Garth and Fred Vincy. This incident allows Eliot to discuss the attitudes of the working classes towards the technological developments of the Industrial Revolution and to contrast these attitudes with those of the middle class. While middle class women “regarded travelling by steam as presumptuous and dangerous”, the local landowners, who had the vote as a result of the Reform Bill of 1832, felt that the railways should pay them a very high price for their land and their “permission to ruin mankind”. Eliot notes that landowners opposed the railways for a variety of reasons: pastures were being cut in two, the noise of the steam engines would cause cows to cast their calves and mares their foals, property rights were being violated, ruffians were being brought into the neighbourhood who would not have come but for the railway, and the railway would eliminate the need for the better breeds of horses. These and similar objections of the rural middle class to the building of railways in Britain were addressed in a variety of publications and editorials such as George Godwin’s 1837 “An Appeal to the Public on the Subject of Railways”. Yet, it is the argument of the disenfranchised lower classes that technology, represented by the railway, would “on’y leave the poor mon funder behind” which is the most telling.

So much can be said about the advantages of technological progress that it may be difficult to understand why there was so much opposition to the building of the railways. While James Watt’s invention of the steam engine in 1769 made possible the industrialization of England, the transition from a primarily agricultural economy to an industrial cash economy was hampered by the difficulty of transporting manufactured goods to distant markets. This problem was solved first with canals (compared to railways in this chapter by Timothy Cooper) and later with commercial railways. When the Liverpool - Manchester Railway opened in 1830, the time necessary to transport goods between the two cities was reduced from 36 hours to one hour and 45 minutes. The speculators who invested in the railways made handsome profits as they opened up the interior of England to industrial development. While the middle class profited, the lower classes became dispossessed.

As industrial development spread across the nation, it became impossible for handicraftsmen to compete with the production of machines. As farm chores became mechanised, agricultural workers also had to leave the countryside to search for work in the cities. There, the philosophy of *laissez-faire* capitalism justified the payment of bare subsistence wages to factory workers. Working conditions, by any modern criteria, were terrible as the new capitalists attempted to exploit the workers, land, and materials to the fullest possible extent in order to reap the biggest possible profits. In a pamphlet written in 1842 [*‘Les Chemin de Fer Seront Ruineux pour la France et Specialment pour les Villes qu’ils Traverseront’* (The Railway will ruin France - Especially the Cities it Connects)], a French critic of industrialization, F.J.B. Noel, stated the objection of the lower classes to industrial development in the same terms that Karl Marx would later use to inspire workers to organise:

*L’industriel manufacturier est la plus grande enemie du peuple;
Sa gloire consiste a trouver le moyen de se passer des hommes, a
remplacer le travail de ceux-ci par le mouvement de ses machines:
l’homme n’est pour lui que l’accessoire de sa machine.*

[The greatest enemy of the people is the industrial manufacturer;
He loves to find ways to make mankind obsolete, to replace the
work of men with the movements of his machines: for him, men
are only accessories for his machines.]

The lower class’s first reaction to the dehumanization of industrialization was violence. In the winter of 1811 -1812, the lower class rose to counter the Industrial Revolution with episodes of machine smashing and personal violence. Parliament responded by making machine smashing punishable by hanging. Several men were hanged to serve as examples, so when Fred Vincy threatens that the rebels in Frick will “all be hanged at the next assizes”, it is not an idle threat: he is merely restating the penalty for opposing “Progress”.

In the popular sentiment (again vis Marx), the Industrial Revolution was the vehicle upon which the middle class was carrying the upper class into the future. Many in the lower classes believed that if they did not derail this project from the outset, that they, individually, would serve as the “sleepers” upon which the rails of a cash economy were being set. In Eliot’s discussion of the social ramifications of industrialization and machine smashing, old Timothy Cooper eloquently states the case of the lower class. He knows that only the “big folks” like Caleb Garth will profit from the railway while it will cause times to get “wusser” for the common folks. It is true that Eliot lets Caleb Garth express the opinion about railways that would prevail in Europe: the opinion that “It may do a bit of harm here and there,

to this and to that; and so does the sun in heaven. But the railway's a good thing''. This is the view that shaped England into an industrial power, but Eliot shows her awareness of the validity of the opposing view expressed by Timothy Cooper when she comments:

Caleb was in a difficulty known to any person attempting in dark times and unassisted by miracle to reason with rustics who are in possession of an undeniable truth which they know through a hard process of feeling, and can let it fall like a giant's club on your neatly-carved argument for a social benefit which they do *not* feel.

Thus, in this one short scene in *Middlemarch*, Eliot has deftly presented the complex reactions of the English people to the Industrial Revolution. The lower class tries to stop the railway to protect itself from dispossession and exploitation. The upper class feebly tries to salvage what it can for itself while the middle class prevails to shape England in accordance with its own values. The vision presented here is that of a society governed by principles similar to those postulated in Darwin's *Origin of Species*: each species (or class) of man seeks its own preservation while only the fittest, the most adaptable, survive.