

Beyond Interpreter of English Maladies: Wiener's Thesis Revisited

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'I've been in pain in eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better,
say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy.'
(Jhumpa Lahiri, 1999, 'Interpreter of Maladies')

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies' is a story about a middle-aged man in India. Mr Kapasi once aspired to become an interpreter in the field of international affairs, but he now works as an English tour guide. While guiding the Indian American Das family during their visit to their ancestral land, he tells them about his other job as an interpreter in a doctor's office, where he bridges the language gap between an Indian doctor and his Gujarati patients. His two jobs meet when Mrs Das asks him to 'interpret' and alleviate a malady arising from her past love affair, thereby breaking the romantic illusions he held with regard to her from across the ocean after her returning to the United States. Throughout this novel, Jhumpa Lahiri, a London-born, New York-based writer with Bengali heritage, illuminates post-colonial situations, also playing the role of cultural interpreter/translator for her Anglophone readers.

Likewise, scholars have played a significant role as interpreters of both their own and others' societies, striving to offer better understandings of or prescriptions for social maladies. A notable case is the British 'decline' debate, which has attracted scholars of modern Britain from across disciplines. Britain was the first industrialised country and remained the leading industrial economy till the middle of the nineteenth century. Since then, Britain's decline has become a recurring subject of public and political debate in Britain. Many scholars have sought to answer the question, 'Where did we go wrong?'¹ Among such works, Martin

¹ Gordon Roderick and Michael Stephens (eds.), *Where Did We Go Wrong?: Industrial Performance, Education and the Economy in Victorian Britain* (London, 1981). For the summary and updates of the debate, see Richard English and Michael Kenny (eds.), *Rethinking British Decline* (London, 2000).

Wiener's thesis, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980*, is of great significance.

This monograph was published in 1981, with a paperback edition appearing the next year and Italian and Japanese translations several years later. It was also reprinted as a Penguin Books edition and portions of it have appeared in edited volumes. Published amid the depressed atmosphere of Britain's economic crisis, this eloquent account has enjoyed a wide readership. However, it has also provoked controversy among scholars and was used by British politicians during the years of Thatcherism. Over two decades later, a new edition was published in the context of an optimistic national attitude towards the country's economy. In the preface to the new 2004 edition, Wiener responds to the debate surrounding his work by evading it, re-defining his work for and in a new context.

In this paper, I will revisit this much-debated question of whether, as suggested by Wiener, English culture cultivated through education was at fault for a century of British decline or its *incomplete* development.² However, I do not aim to answer the question itself as has been done by his critics, but rather examine some problems with the debate, considering both the limitations and possibilities of Wiener's thesis. First, I will examine the ways in which Wiener's thesis was produced and received in order to illuminate some problems with Wiener's and his critics' theses as well as gaps in the frameworks and approaches adopted therein. Second, drawing from Gamble's more comprehensive approach to decline, I will show limitations with their framework and analysis and then explore a new interpretation of the materials provided by Wiener. Third, noting the absence of feminist scholarship on and a gender perspective in the decline debate, I will challenge views found in Wiener's and his critics' theses from a gender perspective. Finally, I will critically look at the ways in which Wiener's thesis has been re-defined by Wiener himself in response to criticisms as well as changes in the context of his thesis over the past two decades.

In summary, I hope to show that there are limitations to the analytical framework of Wiener and his critics, and also that they have failed to adequately incorporate into their analysis the political. They have offered two contrasting, polemical views of modern British history that fail to understand the dynamic and complex processes of socio-cultural transformation as well as its transnational context. However, while his approach has been hitherto dismissed by his critics, Wiener's work, with its presentation of a rich variety of cultural materials, can have validity in a new context in which Wiener adopts a new, ambiguous role

² This paper is based on an essay I wrote during my MA studies at the University of London. I am grateful for Professor Yasuko Takezawa and the editors for giving me an opportunity to revise and develop my argument after a decade. I also would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for his or her comments and suggestions for improving this paper. Finally, I would like to thank Dylan Luers for his careful proofreading and suggestions.

beyond that of an interpreter of English maladies.

Production: Wiener's cultural analysis

English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980 is a very ambitious work covering a wide range of domains that brings in rich cultural materials from a variety of sources and scholarship from various disciplines and fields. It consists of four main parts—‘The Setting’ (PART I), ‘A World View’ (PART II), ‘Towards Behaviour’ (PART III), and ‘Industrialism and English Values’ (PART IV), with parts PART II and III comprising the book’s core. While the title indicates that the volume covers from 1850 to 1980, in fact it mostly focuses on the historical period from the mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth century. Wiener starts his monograph by declaring, ‘The leading problem of modern British history is the explanation of economic decline. It has not always been thus’.³ He then goes on to explore ‘sentiments, attitudes, and values among the English élite’ as the most important ‘key to unlocking the puzzles of modern British history’.⁴

Wiener justifies such a novel approach in a discussion of works by economists in the monograph’s first chapter titled ‘The Janus Face of Modern English Culture’ and its appendix titled ‘British Retardation—The Limits of Economic Explanation’. Rubinstein suggests ‘cultural critique’ like that of Wiener’s thesis entered the decline debate as a consequence of historians’ search for explanations of economic decline that were wider and more fundamental than those derived from pure economic analysis.⁵ The cultural critique or cultural thesis addresses the ‘English disease’, in other words, problems peculiar to or inherent in English culture and psychology, namely the ‘conservative’ attitudes and behaviour of political élites which stood in contrast to the ‘modern’ industrialists, businessmen, and manufactures in Germany and the United States. Wiener has become the best-known cultural critic in this regard, an interpreter of English maladies *par excellence*.

Wiener’s argument is that, by the late nineteenth century, the ‘re-formed and cohesive English elite’ was composed of those who had received a liberal education in public schools⁶ and the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge (collectively called Oxbridge).⁷ These

³ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Cambridge, 1981), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ix–x.

⁵ W. D. Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990* (London and New York, 1993).

⁶ In Britain, ‘public schools’ refer to a specific group of private, independent schools while ‘state schools’ refer to schools for all children that are funded by the government. Boys’ boarding schools, such as Eaton College, Rugby School and Harrow School, have historically catered to the sons of the élite classes.

schools and universities saw vocational preparation through the lens of 'the stigma of utility', and leading them to promote 'traditional' studies that were an 'imitation of the leisured landed gentleman' who forsakes 'the modern role of the professional as expert'.⁸ Thus, the newly formed middle class, with its aspirations of upward mobility, was gentrified or absorbed into an aristocratic culture with little interest in careers in industry. According to Wiener, one consequence of this anti-industrial culture was the economic decline of the world's first industrial nation.

In examining Wiener's thesis, it is first necessary to look at the ways in which it was produced. His work was produced during Britain's economic crisis in the 1970s, a time in which he spent a year in London. Wiener, perhaps finding continuity between the past and the present in the discourse of decline, attempts to explain current problems and dilemmas in Britain from a historical point of view. In doing so, he was influenced by the then prevalent assumption of modernisation theory that sees the characteristics of 'traditional' societies as being a hindrance to the process of modernisation.⁹

This basic assumption can easily be seen in Wiener's references to the work of development economists and Talcott Parsons, and the comparisons he draws between Britain's decline and Japan's success. He unquestioningly accepts the prevailing view of the time which argued that Japan was able to succeed economically because of the 'peculiar' and 'tribal' characteristics of its society and culture.¹⁰ This exceptionalist view came into existence and gained wide acceptance because Japan's experience of modernity could not be explained in terms of the ideal model of modernisation/development,¹¹ due to the model's tendency to define 'modern' as 'Western' and simplistically contrast the 'modern' West and the 'backward' non-West. It is from such a standpoint that Wiener asks, 'How, then, has English middle- and upper-class culture affected the nation's economic development?'¹²

In tackling this question, Wiener, who was originally trained as an intellectual historian,

⁷ Wiener, *English Culture*, 22–24. Emphasis is original.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ Shyama Charan Dube, *Understanding Change: Anthropological & Sociological Perspectives* (New Dehli, 1992).

¹⁰ Wiener, *English Culture*, 5. For the role the 'language of Confucianism' played in Japan's modernisation, see Roger Goodman, 'Ideology and Practice in Japan: Towards a Theoretical Approach', in Roger Goodman and Kirsten Refsing (eds.), *Ideology and Practice in Modern Japan* (London, 1992), ch. 1.

¹¹ For example, Michio Morishima, in his 1982 volume *Why Has Japan 'Succeeded?': Western Technology and the Japanese Ethos* (Cambridge), makes this exceptionalist claim specifically with regard to the Japanese Confucian tradition. In order to explain Japan's post-1990 economic decline, Morishima published *Japan at a Deadlock* (Basingstoke, 2000). Wiener turns from Japan to 'Asian tigers' (Southeast Asian countries) in the new preface to the 2004 edition of his work.

¹² Wiener, *English Culture*, 5.

takes an approach distinct from that of development economists. Drawing from Raymond Williams' remarks on cultural analysis, Wiener attempts to find some 'patterns of a characteristic kind' and to illuminate some of their 'relationships and consequences'.¹³ As Wiener himself notes, his approach was pioneering in scholarship on British history; before the publication of his work, it was uncommon for British scholars to focus on such a 'vague' area, since they made a clear distinction between ideas/imagination (intellectual, literary, and cultural history) and material 'reality' (economic, social, and political history) in history scholarship.¹⁴ Wiener's approach is based on the belief that ideas are 'real' and have consequences.¹⁵ He also makes a distinction between cultural history and literary history or criticism; as the former attempt, he sees himself as illuminating the 'public reception and public image of writers and their work' or 'what they most share with the widest audience'.¹⁶

We can point out various problems with Wiener's initial assumption. Assuming that the 'gentrified' bourgeois culture fostered by education had characteristics that constrained Britain's economic development, Wiener defines English culture and education as a factor behind the economic decline. However, this 'culture' is, as the social and economic historian and recent critic of Wiener points out, a 'so fickle guide, so flexible, anxious to please, and so easily moulded to suit any one of a range of preconceptions'.¹⁷ This criticism need not lead us to question the enterprise of cultural analysis itself, but rather it can draw our attention to the fact that Wiener was experimenting with a new approach to history that went beyond the traditional material/cultural divide before cultural history scholarship flourished through a *marriage* with literary and anthropological approaches.¹⁸

Also, pointing to Britain's 'relatively smooth' transition to modernity that took place with 'no political upheaval', Wiener assumes that 'that very mildness' limited Britain's development, concluding that the nineteenth-century transformation of Britain, as a 'peaceful accommodation', led to the continuation in modern society of 'premodern elements' such as certain values and patterns of behaviour, thus legitimizing 'antimodern sentiments'.¹⁹ Such

¹³ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁷ F. M. L. Thompson, *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain, 1780–1980* (Oxford, 2001), 160. Wiener also quotes this part in the introduction for the new edition of the volume.

¹⁸ Lynn Hunt, 'Introduction: History, Culture, and Text' in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History: Essays* (Berkeley, 1989). For a critical examination of historians' rediscovery and reception of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's work including *Interpretation of Culture*, see Stuart Clark, 'Thick Description, Thin History: Did Historians Always Understand Clifford Geertz?' in Jeffrey C. Alexander, Philip Smith and Matthew Norton (eds.) *Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences* (New York, 2011), ch. 10.

¹⁹ Wiener, *English Culture*, 7.

a view of a linear process of development from the traditional to the modern has been challenged by many studies which have shown that 'tradition' is constantly being made and remade, if not an entirely modern 'invention'.²⁰ Stuart Hall also points out that Wiener is under the influence of a normative view of polity formation based on the French experience of the bourgeois revolution and development, a result of his reliance on the scholarships of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn.²¹ In fact, while classical scholarship argued that the process of making 'peasants into Frenchmen' or French citizens by means of the *mission civilatrice* (universal education) took place over the *longue durée*, more recent scholarship has challenged the ideal view of French polity formation, showing that it is still incomplete, contested, and negotiated on the periphery, such as rural areas.²² Before further examining limitations and possibilities of Wiener's thesis, I would like to consider criticisms of Wiener in the below section.

Reception: Empiricist works challenging Wiener

Wiener's widely read thesis, whilst attracting much acclaim,²³ has also attracted much criticism in the form of empiricist counter arguments. Scholars have shown scepticism regarding the methodology he uses to uncover the influences of anti-industrial culture on people's behaviour, attitudes, and thus economic development.²⁴ The historian Michael Sanderson, in his article 'The English Civic Universities and the 'Industrial Spirit', 1870–1914' that focuses on the development of civic college universities in England from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, argues that Wiener ignores the fact that science courses as well as vocational and technical subjects in English schools and universities were considerably

²⁰ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983). A more moderate view compared to their modernist one has been offered by Anthony D. Smith, who argues that 'the invention of tradition' is in fact the re-interpretation and re-articulation by intellectuals or élites of more complex pre-modern ethnic foundations. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986), 13–18.

²¹ Stuart Hall, (interviewed by Michael Kenny) in English and Kenny (eds.), *Rethinking British Decline*, ch. 8, 107.

²² See Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*, (Stanford, Calif., 1976); Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling* (Cambridge, 1996).

²³ Wiener was awarded the prestigious Robert Livingston Schuyler Prize of the American Historical Association as the best American book on Britain or the Commonwealth.

²⁴ This can be attributed to the fact that many of his critics are economic and social historians who place value on 'hard facts' and 'reality', while Wiener was primarily trained as an intellectual historian, and thus he is familiar with using written expressions of thought as his sources.

²⁵ Michael Sanderson, 1988, 'The English Civic Universities and the "Industrial Spirit", 1870–1914', *Historical Research*, 61 (1988), 90–104.

developed at the time.²⁵ Sanderson criticises Wiener's 'powerful polemic' for its narrow scope that is limited to Oxbridge, and presents statistical data showing that civic universities were the strongest at the time among English universities in terms of student numbers. Then, to support his argument, he provides evidence that these civic universities received considerable financial assistance from local business communities and emphasises that they contributed to British industry both in terms of research and scientific manpower. Combining data, several biographical accounts of notable individuals associated with civic universities, and summaries related educational philosophies. Sanderson further shows that civic universities generated an 'industrial spirit' as well as 'modern' ethos 'linked with, and not divorced from, those of capitalism, science and the economy'.²⁶

The economic historian W. D. Rubinstein offers a substantial critique of Wiener in his work, *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain*.²⁷ Rubinstein directly challenges the most fundamental assumption of Wiener's 'cultural critique' that seeks to understand the decline of the industrial and manufacturing economy. Referring to Cain and Hopkins' thesis on 'gentlemanly capitalism' and some other statistics, Rubinstein argues that Britain was never fundamentally an industrial and manufacturing economy, but rather essentially a 'commercial, financial, and service-based economy whose comparative advantage always lay with commerce and finance'.²⁸ Therefore, what was perceived as Britain's decline was rather Britain's realistic transformation into a service-based economy. Thus, Rubinstein rejects Wiener's cultural critique as 'misconceived', seeing it as being based on a fundamentally inaccurate conception of the nature of the British economy.

Such a view of Britain's 'true' economic position leads Rubinstein to characterise culture and education as pro-industrial and pro-business. In Rubinstein's comparative view, Britain's high culture, as distinct from mass culture, was the least hostile to entrepreneurship and business life in Europe and perhaps in the world. From 1850 onwards it started to become 'more rational and positivistic'.²⁹ Rubinstein, therefore, argues that the British public school system was a 'rational' fit for Britain's economy of the time, which was not in decline. Compared with English middle-class education, he points out that that of Germany focused 'excessively on the classics', and from his social analysis of students' family origins and destinations, contends that the intergenerational shift in occupation among students attending public schools does *not* indicate gentrification of the business class, stating that public schools 'did not act as an intergenerational sieve to eliminate future businessman'.³⁰ Providing evidence that

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 96. There are other empirical studies considering the development of vocational and technical education, but examining them lies beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁷ Rubinstein, *Capitalism*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 127–128.

shows few sons of entrepreneurs entered a public school, Rubinstein argues that if students failed to choose business occupations, it cannot be attributed to public schools. They, coming from the professional class, just followed in 'their father's footsteps' rather than choosing unfamiliar business professions.³¹ Furthermore, he notes that the majority of the British élite did not consist of graduates of public schools and Oxbridge as Wiener suggests.³²

These critics may have contributed to a better understanding of some aspects of modern Britain through thoroughly empiricist research. On the other hand, a division of labour in history scholarship seems to have prohibited the emergence of a substantial critique of Wiener's study. For example, Sanderson should be commended for developing an empirical, alternative view to that of Wiener by shining a light on the development of civic universities, uncovering in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century and onwards more diversity than Wiener allows. But what he presents is a parallel story to that of Wiener's thesis, limiting himself to a social group different from that found in Wiener's work. The real historical situation might not have been so simple; for example, Goldman gives an example of an aristocrat who was considerably involved in the promotion of science education as well as business pursuits.³³ Also, other studies have shown that the distinctive 'civic' ethos flourished only for a short period; civic colleges eventually came to alter their mission from 'modern' high technical training to that of 'traditional' universities, reflecting the superior social status of Oxbridge in the hierarchical higher education system that was consolidated by 1914.³⁴ Furthermore, Wiener and Sanderson fail to recognise national differences within the British education system, such as the distinctive Scottish tradition where professional training was actively undertaken.³⁵

Similarly, Rubinstein's material analysis of socio-economic factors offers a view opposite from that of Wiener—that the actual state of British economy might have been sound. When comparing Wiener's thesis to that of Rubinstein, we can see that while they adopt different views of the state of the economy in Victorian Britain, in the end they simply offer two different and one-sided arguments that contrast the characteristics of 'traditional', 'anti-industrial' culture, education, and society with those of their 'modern', 'pro-industrial' versions, explaining economic and social transformations in terms of people's either 'rational' or 'irrational' choice. This shows that the analytical frameworks of Wiener and his critics

³¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

³² *Ibid.*, 137–139.

³³ Lawrence Goldman, 'A History with the Politics Left Out. Cambridge 1870–1990', Review Article, *Oxford Review of Education*, 23(2) (1997), 229–234.

³⁴ See Roy Lowe, 1987, 'Structural Change in English Higher Education, 1870–1920' in Detlef Muller, Fritz Ringer and Brian Simon (eds.), *The Rise of the Modern Educational System: Structural Change and Social Reproduction, 1870–1920* (London, 1987), ch. 7; R. D. Anderson, *Universities and Elites in Britain since 1800* (Cambridge, 1995).

³⁵ Anderson, *Universities and Elites*, 22–30.

are limited because they are based on modernisation theory. Wiener's initial question is thus problematic; embracing a modernisation paradigm, he searches for a primary cause of Britain's decline and *incomplete* modernisation, which he uncritically assumes are facts. Following this assumption, he defines culture as simply primary determinants of decline without offering any contextual and relational accounts of colonialism and imperialism or the world political economy, to which we now turn.

Beyond the limitations in framework and analysis

There is a fundamental limitation in Wiener's framework. It is nation-state bound and fails to sufficiently examine the political context of the time. In contrast to the accounts of Wiener and Rubinstein, Andrew Gamble, a political scientist who has been described as the 'author of one of the best exciting books on decline',³⁶ provides a more comprehensive picture of the topic. In his *Britain in Decline: Economic Policy, Political Strategy and the British State*, Gamble emphasises the political dimension that lay behind British economic decline. Gamble is basically sceptical that there was something called the 'British national economy' that formed part of the worldview of the British political élite during the era of national protectionism.³⁷ Gamble suggests that we should understand it as political perception rather than an objective reality, and reminds readers that the discourses of British decline obscure the reality that Britain remained and remains one of the wealthiest countries in the world.³⁸ It is therefore necessary to understand decline in two ways: first, as a discourse constituted by 'the particular ideas and assumptions of those participating in it', and, second, as a historical process that operates by both emphasizing the *absolute* decline in British imperial power and the *relative* decline of British economic competitiveness in comparison with the other countries, namely, Western Europe and Japan.³⁹

This indicates that the context of the discourse of British decline is much wider than Wiener allows, as well as that it also differs between pre-war and post-war times.⁴⁰ Until the end of the Second World War, Britain retained an Empire where 'English gentlemen' were

³⁶ Richard English and Michael Kenny, 'Preface and Acknowledgements' in English and Kenny (eds.), *Rethinking British Decline*, x.

³⁷ Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline: Economic Policy, Political Strategy and the British State*. 4th edn (London, 1994; 1st edn, 1981), xi.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xv, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xvii–xviii.

⁴⁰ Gamble identifies three different stages for the discourse of decline: the first stage between the 1880s and the 1920s, the second stage between the aftermath of the Second World War and the 1960s, and the third stage between the 1960s and early 1970s. See, Gamble, 'Theories and Explanations of British Decline' in English and Kenny (eds.), *Rethinking British Decline*, ch. 1, 5–6.

sent. Recent studies have shown that the Empire not only influenced on the construction of class and gender at home, but it was also lived through everyday practices.⁴¹ Wiener later identifies the need to include Britain's experience of empire, as it shaped education into being a training ground for moral imperial administrators.⁴² In his thesis, Wiener relates a story found in a letter from Fredrick Lugand (1858–1945), the great colonial administrator, to his sister, which describes how one young man preferred the civil service in India over a business job, describing the former as a 'gentlemanly occupation'. However, Wiener mentions this merely to illustrate the existence of bias against industry.⁴³

On the other hand, it is evident that, as Wiener shows, there *was* certainly a discourse of decline, which his critics have neglected. The problem is that Wiener fully believes in Britain's economic decline; he documents the discourses of decline formulated by the 'articulate' classes⁴⁴ while treating them as if they *reflect* reality rather than *constitute* it. In this way, he fails to identify the real workings of these discourses. From documents such as the 1906 pamphlet *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, we can see how a sense of crisis was constructed for its readers. The text's author adopts the voice of a Japanese historian who is sharing with Japanese children the fictive historical lesson of how the British empire met its downfall; in doing so, he is urging British readers to realise the decadent state of their own Empire in a way that evokes Edward Gibbon's monumental historical work on the Roman Empire.⁴⁵ Gamble notes that discourses of both the decline of Empire and the economy influenced policy formation, which led to a 'modernisation' of institutions through the mimicking of other successful countries.⁴⁶ Furthermore, as Wiener's work suggests, the mid-nineteenth century also witnessed the beginning of comparisons with others by influential British thinkers, writers, journalists and mass media, coupled with the emergence and development of various comparative disciplines.

What we need to do is critically examine rather than trace and reproduce such a comparative perspective, as has been done by Wiener and his critics.⁴⁷ In the discourses presented

⁴¹ Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁴² Martin Wiener (interviewed by Michael Kenny) in English and Kenny, (eds.), *Rethinking British Decline*, ch. 2, 30.

⁴³ Wiener, *English Culture*, 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴⁵ This pamphlet was published a year after the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which was originally signed in 1902. Probably due to the alliance, the author points out some resemblances between the English and the Japanese, such as them both being an 'Island race on the verge of a great Continent' as well as having 'the same sturdy physique'. Vivian Gray [Elliot E. Mills], *The Decline and Fall of the British Empires* (Oxford, 1906), reprinted in Yorimitsu Hashimoto (ed.), *Yellow Peril: A Collection of Historical Sources* (Tokyo, 2005), 3, ch. 25, 60.

by Wiener, we can trace the articulation of 'English' identity that was based on a revived and revised élite culture and articulated in comparison with emerging empires.⁴⁶ As Stuart Hall points out, 'the notion of decline is caught up with the question of embattled national identity.'⁴⁷ It is very likely that such a comparative perspective influenced the political, especially by redefining in a nationalist way Englishness as 'moral', 'civilised', and 'rural' vis-à-vis 'modern', 'material', and 'urban' Americans and continental Europeans. Thus, moving beyond narratives of decline, we need to re-interpret the ways in which Britain has gone from representing itself as the 'world factory' to 'the green garden' and 'the country of Shakespeare and Milton, of Wordsworth and Sherry, of Tennyson and Browning'⁵⁰.

According to Michael Sadler, the first Director of the Office of Special Inquiries and Reports and a keen observer and interpreter of foreign education systems, this Englishness was to spread, beyond private school students, 'more widely and systematically, throughout all classes of the community' through the cultivation of love for nature and literature in the state schools.⁵¹ Indeed, although schooling had been conducted under voluntary auspices

⁴⁶ Gamble, 'Theories and Explanations', 17.

⁴⁷ Also in the 2000 interview, Wiener reproduces such a comparative perspective by pointing out the underdevelopment of technical education in Britain with no equivalent of MIT in Britain (Wiener interviewed by Kenny), 32).

⁴⁸ Rebecca Langlands, 'Britishness or Englishness?: The Historical Problem of National Identity in Britain,' *Nations and Nationalism*, 5 (1) (1999), 53–69.

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall (interviewed by English and Kenny), 109.

⁵⁰ William Ralph Inge, *Our Present Discontents* (1938) quoted in Wiener, *English Culture*, 113.

⁵¹ Quoted from J. H. Hogginson (ed.), *Selections from Michael Sadler: Studies in World Citizenship* (Liverpool, 1979), 49–51. Sadler played an influential role in the formulation of education policies. In 1900, he gave a famous lecture titled 'How Far Can We Learn Anything of Practical Value from the Study of Foreign System of Education?' to an audience of teachers at the Guildford Educational Conference. In this lecture, which uses Germany as a comparative reference point, he stressed the importance of 'efficiency' in education (the national efficiency movement was active at the time) and also suggested cultivating love of nature and literature in both town children and country children. In 1903, seeking for autonomy from politics, Sadler resigned from the Office of Special Inquiries and Reports and then held important positions at universities, such as vice-chancellorship at Leeds and Master of University College, Oxford. Sadler also contributed to university extension movement while at Oxford, and was appointed to inquire into the affairs of Calcutta University from 1917 to 1919 (Calcutta University Commission), resulting 13 volume Calcutta University Report. With these distinguished achievements, he is regarded as the founding father of British comparative education. For a brief biography, see J. H. Hogginson, 'Michael Ernest Sadler', *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*, 24 (3/4) (1994), 455–469. Reproduced by UNESCO in 2002 at <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/sadlere.pdf>. Also see J. Sislian, *Sir Michael Sadler 1861–1943: England's Interpreter and America's Admirer* (New York, 2002); *State and Education in England and Germany: a Sadlerian Perspective* (New York, 2005).

in Britain, this period saw gradually growing state intervention in education in both the private and state sector after the creation of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools in 1839. For example, the inquiry commission pressured public schools to introduce science into the curriculum, a fact that Wiener mentions to argue that there was reluctance on the part of public schools to embrace the sciences, which instead favoured Greek and Roman classics as the basis of liberal education.⁵²

Also, through education reforms, notably the Education Act of 1902, the state and local authorities promoted curriculum reform in state schools.⁵³ Wiener sees this reform as the 'molding of the state system' 'in line with the ideals of the education of the gentry' in public schools.⁵⁴ However, it needs to be understood as the state's attempt to shape education in response to its modern needs, such as sharing 'Englishness' in its citizenry regardless of class and gender, at a time when the Aliens Act of 1905, the first act for immigration controls and regulation was about to be put into effect.⁵⁵ Interestingly, such a modernity project was preceded in its Empire, notably India. Macaulay's Minute of 1835 famously discusses the formation of 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' shaped through selective higher education in English that would serve as 'interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern' in maintaining British rule.⁵⁶ Until then, the Indian élite class had been educated in and through Sanskrit or Arabic language and literature, which Macaulay found useless. His vision of 'Brown Englishmen'—'an almost but never quite complete project'⁵⁷—suggests that education reforms at home were influenced by and in line with those in the colonies.

In contrast to Wiener's view, which presents this kind of redefinition of Englishness as a 'wrong path' that led to decline, these discourses and reforms suggest that Englishness was

⁵² Wiener, *English Culture*, 17–19.

⁵³ Linda Simpson, 'Imperialism, National Efficiency and Education, 1900–1905', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 16 (1) (1984), 28–36, 35.

⁵⁴ Wiener, *English Culture*, 21–22.

⁵⁵ It was specifically targeted at the increasing number of Jewish immigrants who were fleeing persecution in Russia and East Europe.

⁵⁶ 'Minute of the 2nd of February 1835' in *Speeches: with his Minute on Indian Education by Lord Macaulay*, selected with an introduction and notes by G. M. Young (New York, 1979), 359. Thomas Babington Macaulay was appointed for President of the Committee of Public Instruction in 1834. Macaulay's Minute was influential on the formulation of the English Education Act of 1835, which was enforced to reform education in India. See, Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven and London, 2012), 225–230. Problematising the ignorance of the common people, Macaulay also argued for state intervention in education in England at the House of Commons in 1847. For the full text, see 'A Speech Delivered in the House of Commons on the 19th of April, 1847' in Young (ed.), *Speeches*, 300–326.

⁵⁷ Hall, *Macaulay*, 229.

being re-articulated by these intellectuals or élites. This comparative project was a driving force for modernisation in Britain that, while being the first industrialised economy and then an unparalleled imperial power, was facing competitions from rival powers.⁵⁸

Shifting the perspective to gender

This section seeks to use a gender perspective to explore an alternative view of the practice and role of education in late Victorian Britain. It should be first pointed out that decline debate has remained gender-blind and male-dominated to date. For example, *Rethinking British Decline*, published in 2000, updates the debate for the new century by presenting the new works and reflections of some influential contributors to the debate including Wiener, but again, a gender perspective is missing.⁵⁹ Wiener and his critics have ignored the dimension of gender, only focusing upon social class. This may stem from the fact that the decline debate has centred on 'gentleman' culture and economy, assuming women as an irrelevant and non-articulate class. Furthermore and more strikingly, although feminist scholarship has contributed to a shift in perspective from one based on the classical preoccupation of class struggle to one concerned with gender, there is a lack of such works that challenge Wiener and his critics. Perhaps such neglect is partially a result of feminist historical scholarship being traditionally concerned with heroic accounts of women's 'achievements', such as feminist struggles for women's rights to vote and access to education in Britain and elsewhere from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.⁶⁰

This is a fatal omission, since the period when the discourse of British decline emerged in the mid-nineteenth century also saw a florescence of the women's movement followed by the gradual development of secondary and higher education for women. For example, the first women's college that offered a liberal higher education, Bedford College (London), opened in 1849 in response to the demands of young women from better-off families and their parents.⁶¹ Later, the university extension movement for the working classes and women

⁵⁸ According to Satoshi Mizutani, this practice of the 'imperial politics of comparison' has also been pointed out by the historical anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler. 'Anne Stoler no Shokuminchi Kenkyu to Higashi Ajia karano Ôtokanôsei' (Ann Stoler's Call for a Refiguring of Colonial Studies and a Possible Response from East Asia), *The Zinbun Gakuhô* (Journal of Humanities), 100, 49–75 (in Japanese).

⁵⁹ There is a chapter by two female scholars, but it examines British decline in relation with European integration. See Marie-Therese Fay and Elizabeth Meehan, 'British Decline and European Integration' in English and Kenny (eds.), *Rethinking*, ch. 13.

⁶⁰ See Jill Ker Conway, 'Rethinking the Impact of Women's Education' in Jill Ker Conway and Susan C. Bourque (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Education: Perspectives from Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996), 245–258.

from the 1850s to the 1870s led to the founding of women's colleges in Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin, allowing women to attend lectures and take examinations.⁶²

These changes suggest the existence of a rather 'modern' education movement in response to social demands, which led even ancient universities to create new spaces and time for women. But this could also be part of the process of accommodation and absorption of the new bourgeoisie into the old class that Wiener documents. In studying education, therefore, we should look beyond access to education, focusing on questions like, what was taught and *actually* learned at these schools and universities? What values and mentalities arose due to the education offered at them? What career paths were followed by their graduates? What consequences did educational expansion and reforms bring to the existing gendered power relations as well socio-cultural values?

Indeed, feminist historians have argued that education prepared men for productive labour and women for consumption and the reproduction of a family defined by new Victorian ideals for the new middle class, which articulated separate spheres for men and women as a result of the development of capitalism.⁶³ Howarth and Curthoys have documented the gender divisions in the curriculum in public schools and universities in England from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. What is interesting here is that, while male students studied 'dead languages and outmoded sciences', women 'suffered no such pressure to acquire knowledge that was "useless, absurd or fantastical"'.⁶⁴ Adam Smith thought that privileged women should only be taught what was judged 'necessary or useful for them to learn' by their parents and guardians.⁶⁵ The existence of such practices is confirmed in Burstyn's study: for an affordable price, middle-class girls were educated by governesses

⁶¹ Janet Howarth and Mark Curthoys, 1987, 'The Political Economy of Women's Higher Education in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain', *Historical Research*, 60, 208–231.

⁶² While University of London degrees were opened to women in 1878, it took more time for women to become able to obtain a university degree in the ancient universities. In 1878, the University of London became the first university in Britain to admit women to its degree program. In 1881, two women obtained a BSc, and by 1895 over 10 percent of the graduates were women, a figure that reached 30 percent by 1900. Oxford admitted women as degree-seeking full university members in 1920. Cambridge was considerably late, with women being admitted to its degree program only in 1949. After this change, women who had attended these universities earlier came to be regarded as holding the corresponding degree. <http://www.london.ac.uk/history.html>; <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/newsletter/1998/aug-sep/3.html> (accessed on 2nd of September 2013).

⁶³ Joan N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (Totowa, N.J., 1980); Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge, 1992). According to Hall, Evangelicals provided the dominant view that claimed the existence of natural differences and inequality between men and women, convinced of the necessity for a national reform of morals and manners (*Ibid.*, 83).

⁶⁴ Howarth and Curthoys, 'The Political', 208.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

BEYOND INTERPRETER OF ENGLISH MALADIES

at their homes or in small private schools so that they would learn social skills rather than intellectual or domestic ones.⁶⁶

Education was also viewed as a symbol of social status and social mobility, reflecting the presence of a social ideal of self-improvement at the time. Howarth, in her article on girls' schools and social mobility from 1880 to 1914, identifies considerable diversity in the social backgrounds of female students and the ways in which they used their college educations.⁶⁷ While some climbed the educational ladder to pursue their professional and intellectual ambitions, for many girls from 'genteel or middle-class families', college education was *not* a means of upward mobility but rather 'insurance against downward mobility'.⁶⁸ College education gave way to 'professional or quasi-professional employment' for 'single women whose fathers could not make adequate long-term provisions for their support'.⁶⁹ Furthermore, female students in Oxbridge, London colleges, and medical schools before 1914 were not necessarily from residential public schools: there were other types of schools recognised as places that produce academically successful students who attend Oxbridge and other colleges. They included other kinds of less expensive schools such as public day schools.⁷⁰ Thus, the path from public schools to Oxbridge that Wiener suggests did not necessarily apply to young women.

Howarth further questions whether girls' schools were the 'Tom Brown's Universe' (as described in the novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays*)⁷¹ that boys' public schools were seen as being at the time.⁷² While recognizing the existence of a public school consciousness that transcended individual public schools for boys, Howarth identifies special characteristics which inhibited the growth of a common public school consciousness in girls' schools; students were from a more varied set of socio-economic classes and there was limited interaction between schools through sports.⁷³

⁶⁶ Burstyn, *Victorian Education*, 22–23.

⁶⁷ Janet Howarth, 'Public Schools, Safety-nets and Educational Ladders: the Classification of Girls' Secondary Schools, 1880–1914', *Oxford Review of Education*, 11 (1) (1985), 59–71.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁹ Howarth shows that about one in five female students in Oxford before 1914 were orphans or fatherless daughters 'at risk of downward mobility' (*Ibid.*, 67).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷¹ This Thomas Hughes novel, which is set in Rugby School, is quoted in Wiener's thesis to illustrate the attitude cultivated in these schools that looked down upon 'working to get your living' and money-making in favour of 'doing some real good in the world' (Wiener, *English Culture*, 20).

⁷² This was because their schools catered to a more varied set of socio-economic classes with their modest fees, interaction between them was geographically limited, and doubt existed within them regarding the value of incorporating sports in the ways that boys' schools did (Howarth, 'Public Schools', 63).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 63–64.

As we have seen, a gender perspective reveals a different story than that of Wiener's, highlighting the differences in the practice and role of education between men and women. These studies suggest that education for English middle-class men and women was basically responding to the needs of the new normative gender roles and gendered divisions of labour of the new middle classes, which is a process of *modern* social transformation in response to dynamic political and economic changes. Wiener later admitted that he concentrated too much on public schools and should have looked at the education throughout society.⁷⁴ Certainly he should have done so, but a gender perspective alone can illuminate such diversity, and it would also assist in the development of new exciting studies on the Empire across the metropole and the colonies that would go beyond the standard focus on boy's experiences.⁷⁵ It is therefore necessary to explore the meaning that such gendered practices and experiences of education had for men and women in a wider transnational context, such as Britain's imperial expansion and competition, beyond conventional disciplinary practices.⁷⁶

Transformation: Wiener's thesis in and for a new context

This section critically looks at the ways in which Wiener's thesis has been re-contextualised and thus re-defined by Wiener himself in the new edition of his monograph that was published in 2004 as well as in an interview published in 2000 in the edited book titled *Rethinking British Decline*. Until then, despite the existence of such a heated debate over the decades, Wiener has neither explicitly defended nor developed his thesis, instead choosing to embark on a new area of study, crime and punishment, while keeping his interests in Victorian England.⁷⁷

While accepting some of the criticisms regarding the insufficiency of the evidence avail-

⁷⁴ Wiener (interviewed by Kenny), 32.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Hall and Rose (eds.), *At Home*, in particular the following chapters: James Epstein, 'Taking Class Notes on Empire' (cha. 12), Keith McClelland and Sonya Rose, 'Citizenship and Empire, 1867–1928' (cha. 13).

⁷⁶ There are gaps in historical studies on education among specialist historians. Sanderson also points out such gaps between historians of education and economic historians who study education, economic, and social change. The former tend to stress the achievements and development of education, while the latter takes a cooler view that is biased towards formal economics and interested in the topic of growth (Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change and Society in England, 1780–1870*, Studies in Economic and Social History. 2nd edn (London, 1991).

⁷⁷ In his new area of study, Wiener has again received acclaims, winning prizes and having his books published in both hardcover and paperback editions. Martin Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law and Policy in England 1830–1914* (Cambridge, 1990); *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge, 2004); *An Empire on Trial: Race, Murder and Justice under British Rule, 1870–1935* (Cambridge, 2009).

able at the time of writing as well as his privileging of ideas over reality, Wiener problematises the ways in which his thesis was received by his critics. He states that they *wrongly* suggested it was a 'complete explanation of British decline' and thus his 'position became exaggerated in "translation" by others', while, in fact, he intended it to explain a change or development 'that did not occur as it might have' after the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁸ It is likely that Wiener is attempting to defend his thesis in this way by shifting the focus because he has come to adopt the accepted view on decline. But even if it is so, by considering educational reforms and practice⁷⁹ that were coupled with articulations of gender, class, nation and race, we arrive at a different picture of modern Britain; it appears that the historical process of social transformation did take place with gradual state intervention, albeit not as drastically as the case of latecomers like Japan, where the central government played a very active role in initiating modernisation through education.⁸⁰ In order to see how far this process of social transformation, which includes the formation of gendered middle class, is an 'English peculiarity', it is necessary to re-imagine comparative studies without relying on the ideal model of development.

Furthermore, Wiener tactically re-defines and thus legitimatises his thesis by re-contextualising it in the introduction to the new edition of his book. In other words, he provides a new political context for his thesis: the end of empire, resurgence of nationalisms in Scotland and Wales, and a changed economic context characterised by Britain's loss of economic superiority vis-à-vis its European neighbours.⁸¹ Then, without any single revision or update, he claims that it remains 'a vivid portrait of one face of modern British history' and a 'founding text of the study of national identities' that preceded a wealth of literature on this subject.⁸² As we have seen, this is not what Wiener originally intended his work to be; he was primarily concerned with Britain's economic decline which is closely linked with the question

⁷⁸ Wiener (interviewed by Kenny), 31, 35. Stuart Hall also offers a similar view to Wiener; there is a certain 'real' way of dealing with and entering modernity, which Britain did not do (Hall, interviewed by English and Kenny, 108).

⁷⁹ For the development of university reforms in the nineteenth century, see Michael Sanderson, *The Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1971).

⁸⁰ Compared with France and Japan, the process of centralisation of education in Britain has been more gradual. As for Japan's political discourse on education, see Byron Marshall, *Learning to Be Modern: Japanese Political Discourse on Education*, New Perspectives on Asian History (Boulder, Colo., 1994).

⁸¹ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980*. 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2004), xiii.

⁸² This trend in scholarship was sparked by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

⁸³ See Wiener, 'Some Leaders of Opinion and Economic Growth in Britain, 1918–74', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13 (1979), 353–368.

of Englishness.⁸³ Yet, seeing how most of his volume, in particular the core parts of PART II and PART III, is dominated by descriptive accounts rather than analysis of shared values, mentality, anxieties, he is able to re-interpret and re-define his thesis in this way with the rich cultural materials he provides from a wide range of sources. This is why and how portions of his thesis have kept appearing in edited volumes in various fields of study to date.⁸⁴ His thesis is thus likely to survive with some validity in a new context, despite the claims of his critics who see ‘the rise and fall of cultural explanations of economic performance’⁸⁵ and the decline of declinist discourse itself.⁸⁶

Indeed, a distinction needs to be made here. To date, Wiener’s critics with pragmatic or empiricist views have overtly questioned the validity of his cultural analysis by problematising his selective, random use of cultural, literary materials vis-à-vis their objective, empirical evidence.⁸⁷ In my view, however, while he misinterprets English culture as a result of his adoption of modernisation theorists’ insights as a framework of analysis, his methodology has rather enabled him to describe the *imaginaire social* and *mentalité* of the English élite class. This kind of study has been neglected in the field of cultural studies and anthropology, which have been more concerned with non-dominant class or minority groups in Britain. In doing so, he has made important points such as the parallel nature of English country life and the open-air life in overseas possessions was portrayed vis-à-vis the ‘decadent life of modern cities’, which were associated with the U. S. and Germany.⁸⁸ This suggests an interesting way of imagining a community—the British Empire, across the metropole and the colonies, and racial boundaries—that needs to be understood beyond the binary framework of the West and the Other.⁸⁹ Moving from intellectual history scholarship to cultural history

⁸⁴ According to Wiener, parts of his thesis have appeared in the following volumes: Anita Cross and Robert McCormick, (eds.), *Technology in Schools* (London, 1986); Mark Casson, (ed.), *Entrepreneurship* (London, 1989); Youssef Cassis (ed.), *Business Elites* (London, 1994); Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Oxford Reader on Class* (Oxford, 1995); Judy Giles and Tim Middleton (eds.), *Writing Englishness 1900–1959: An Introductory Sourcebook*. (London, 1995); Rohan McWilliam and Kelly Boyd (eds.), *The Victorian Studies Reader* (London, 2007). ‘Martin J. Wiener Curriculum Vitae’ at <https://history.rice.edu/uploadedFiles/Faculty/Bios/Wiener%20Sept%202013%20.pdf>, Accessed on 10th of September 2013.

⁸⁵ This is taken from the subtitle of the conclusion of Thompson’s monograph, ‘Conclusion: The rise and fall of cultural explanations of economic performance’ (*Gentrification*, ch. 7).

⁸⁶ Gamble argues that ‘on a larger view, the discourse of decline seems likely to fade away’ and that it will not be ‘the dominant framework of interpretation in the twenty-first century’ (‘Theories and Explanations’, 19).

⁸⁷ As for the recent critique on Wiener’s ‘cultural critique’, see Thompson, *Gentrification*.

⁸⁸ Wiener, *English Culture*, p. 56.

⁸⁹ The latter approach was experimented with by Edward W. Said, in his influential work, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).

BEYOND INTERPRETER OF ENGLISH MALADIES

scholarship, Wiener was developing a new way of doing history.

It is also worth noting that while he has changed his area of study, Wiener has continued to develop a new methodology that incorporates a variety of fields of study in order to provide a new cultural interpretation. This is explicitly expressed in his review essay titled 'Treating "Historical" Sources as Literary Texts: Literary Historicism and Modern British History', where he argues that historians should adopt literary approaches as their methods rather than literary theories, as is often done.⁹⁰ While such an approach is no longer unusual after the 'cultural (interpretive) turn' in mid-1990s, it was during the time of Wiener's thesis was produced. Since then, a new generation of cultural historians have produced stimulating works by appropriating literary and anthropological theory and approaches in their historical studies, hence subverting the existing hierarchy within historical scholarship in which cultural history was undervalued relative to social and economic history.⁹¹ I therefore think it necessary to re-evaluate Wiener's work in terms of methodological innovation and re-interpret, revise, and develop the thesis, setting aside its declinist agenda as well as the analytical framework and ideal model Wiener relies on.

We should not overlook another aspect of Wiener's thesis: as a result of its wide reception, it has been appropriated in and for politics and has become a popular history/ethnography of English culture. As Sanderson notes, his theme 'directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, has speeded into the received wisdom of public life'.⁹² It is well known that Wiener's argument was used by Thatcherite ministers, notably Keith Joseph, who claimed that a radical change in enterprise culture and popular attitudes towards economic modernisation was necessary to rebuild its economy.⁹³ Wiener later revealed that he felt 'very ambivalent' and 'a little horrified' for being 'the typical academic' who had not thought his work would influence political debate.⁹⁴ The education sector was one of the main targets of this 'radical' change or 'modernisation'. Comparing it to its German equivalent as was done a century ago, it was found to be lacking, and technical, vocational and curricular reforms were implemented through the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) of 1988. The same year saw the introduction of the 'National Curriculum' through the Education Reform Act of 1988, enforcing 'a standard language, a definitive canon of English literature and a single shared narrative of the nation's history',⁹⁵ an attempt to stifle the growing trend of

⁹⁰ Martin Wiener, 1998, Review Article, 'Treating "Historical" Sources as Literary Texts: Literary Historicism and Modern British History', *Journal of Modern History*, 70, 619–638.

⁹¹ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, 2004); Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History*.

⁹² Sanderson, 'The English', 103–104.

⁹³ Gamble, 'Theories and Explanations', 11.

⁹⁴ Wiener (interviewed by Kenny), 29.

⁹⁵ R. D. Grillo, *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference: State, Culture, and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford and New York, 1998), 202.

multicultural education. These reforms suggest that the discourses of decline worked again as a force to 'modernise' institutions such as schools and universities as well as to promote an élitist and conservative vision of a national past and identity.

Beyond its immediate influence on contemporary politics, Wiener's thesis probably also contributed to a cultural movement in line with these reforms. His portrayal of English culture overlaps with that found in 'heritage films' that have flourished since the early 1980s—the time of depressed British economic climate. These films are typically based on canonical English literature, one example of which can be found in Merchant-Ivory's adaptations of E. M. Foster's works such as *A Room with a View* (1985). These films were criticised for re-presenting a nostalgic Englishness directed towards a culturally conservative élite,⁹⁶ though, according to Wiener, this vision of English country life, which was romanticised by those influential literati such as E. M. Foster, William Morris, George Gissing, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and Alfred Tennyson, was not necessarily conservative and imperial in nature but was related to the rural populist myth of the idealised 'peasant' cultural tradition.⁹⁷

In fact, the 'heritage' industry, which has grown to attract public interest in Britain, was officially promoted by the creation of the Department of National Heritage in 1992 during the Major administration which succeeded that of Thatcher. The department was replaced by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) during the following 'New Labour' administrations led by Blair and Brown. Advocating 'Cool Britannia', New Labour attempted to reinvent and re-define 'Britishness' in the context of late 1990s by shifting the focus to contemporary culture and cultural diversity.⁹⁸ However, it is questionable whether it has succeeded in challenging dominant Englishness; the government has supported and protected films which supposedly depict 'Britishness' in the face of the globalising force of the Hollywood films. It can be said that this New Labour policy has rather led to the popularisation of English high culture through a series of film adaptations of canonical English literature whilst accommodating social, racial and sexual diversity to some degree.⁹⁹

Together with these cultural texts and heritage sites, Wiener's thesis might serve as the basis for a politics that seeks to re-construct national identity based on white, middle-class,

⁹⁶ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 2008), 211–212.

⁹⁷ Wiener, *English Culture*.

⁹⁸ For example, an academic conference on 'Re-inventing Britain' was held in London on 21 March 1997 by the British Council and chaired by Stuart Hall. Hall suggested reinventing Britain with contributions by creative art practitioners from ethnic minority communities. For more details, *British Studies Now*, 9, 'Re-inventing Britain: Identity, Transnationalism and the Arts'.

⁹⁹ For example, lesbian relationships are depicted together with the upper-class life in the film adaptations of (Virginia Woolf's) *Mrs. Dalloway* (1998) and *The Duchess* (2008). On the heritage film phenomenon, see Andrew Higson, 2002, *English Heritage, English Cinema* (Oxford, 2002).

BEYOND INTERPRETER OF ENGLISH MALADIES

male heritage, despite his intention to re-define his thesis as an alternative or counter narrative to the 'master narrative' called 'Whig' history.¹⁰⁰ As *The Economist* reports, 'Perhaps because it is so flattering, implying that the British are just too civilised to waste themselves on mindless materialism, the "cultural critique" remains popular in Britain.'¹⁰¹ Wiener's interpretation of maladies, though not offering definitive remedies, seems to have made some readers feel better about their English identity. In such a way, his thesis might be read either with nostalgia or trauma in Britain or as a negative lesson or ideal model of 'postindustrial society' in another country¹⁰² depending on the political, economic, and social context. This topic deserves further study. As Wiener says elsewhere, 'the life of texts only begins with their fashioning' and 'texts are continuously "re-presenting" (...) in the act of reception'.¹⁰³ This would give Wiener an ambiguous, or, to use his words, 'Janus faced' role beyond that of an interpreter of English maladies.

Conclusion

The preoccupation with Britain's decline has generated many studies on the subject across disciplines, with Wiener's thesis serving as a focal point for the debate that has taken place therein. This paper has examined the ways in which Wiener's thesis has been produced, received and re-defined. In doing so, I have, in contrast to the approaches of many of Wiener's critics that problematise his cultural analysis with an empiricist view, identified some problems, limitations with and gaps between Wiener's and his critics' theses, in terms of their analytical frameworks, approaches and perspectives.

This paper has also looked at the ways in which Wiener defends and re-defines his thesis in response to criticisms as well as new contexts, suggesting himself as having gone beyond being an interpreter of English maladies. Thus, it has brought to light the possibilities of re-interpreting Wiener's thesis for and in a new context as an academic history on and popu-

¹⁰⁰ According to Wiener, the Whig has positively presented British history as 'the inexorable rise of the world's most civilised society, humane and balanced, successful even in giving up an empire so peacefully' (interviewed by Kenny, 35).

¹⁰¹ 'British economy: Buck up Chaps', Anonymous, *The Economist*, July 17, 1993, 85.

¹⁰² For example, the translator of the Japanese edition expresses sympathy with anti-industrialism among the English élite and how such a view placed value on the 'quality' rather than the 'quantity' of life. He states that he was lead to this view after experiencing the drastic social change in Japan over the past three decades. The translator suggests readers learn from the British case in order to move to a mature stage of society. Tsuyoshi Hara, '*Yakusha Atogaki*' (Translator's Notes) in Martin Wiener, *Eikoku Sangyo-seishin no Suitai* (English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit) (Tokyo, 1984), 332.

¹⁰³ Wiener, 'Treating', 620.

lar history/ethnography for the re-construction of Englishness, as well as the perils of popularisation especially in the context of a resurgence of debates on the question of Britishness. Indeed, Wiener's text provides us an interesting case for examining the public reception or consumption of an academic historiography that does not necessarily follow the intentions of the author.

I have suggested that it is important to re-evaluate Wiener's thesis in terms of its innovative methodology that accumulates rich cultural materials and critically re-contextualises and re-interprets them. Looking at Wiener's depiction of the mentalities, values, and anxieties expressed by the articulate classes, it is possible to see the ways in which the comparative perspective prevalent in these discourses has articulated Englishness while at the same time working as a driving force for 'modernisation' and reinforcing state intervention in such domain as education. Though insufficiently done, Wiener has also shed light on debates surrounding education reform as well as their wider cultural effects by using literary sources and examining them in a wider historical context, a hitherto neglected area and approach in the specialist field of history of education.¹⁰⁴ We need to re-examine the reforms, practice and role of education in the *modern* social and cultural process with a gender perspective and an eye to its transnational political context.

Revisiting Wiener's thesis in this way has shown that there are many tasks remaining that would enable us to find new possibilities for research arising from his thesis. Learning and unlearning from Wiener, it is necessary to take on these tasks, filling gaps in existing scholarship and in doing so challenge the grand narratives of modern British history and Englishness/Britishness.

¹⁰⁴ The historian of education Harold Silver has pointed out that studies on the history of education neglect educational realities, the impact of education, and education's role in cultural and social process in Victorian Britain. Such neglect has led to 'the imposition of narrow and inappropriate models of social structure, social interaction and social change on nineteenth-century experience.' Harold Silver, *Education as History: Interpreting Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Education* (London, 1983).