

Week 6 Lecture Notes

The Victorian World: Great Britain and Mid-Century

If there was any country that dominated the nineteenth century world, that country was England. The emphasis here is on *world*: Britain had created in the nineteenth century a global empire. In fact, it was the largest empire ever assembled in human history in sheer size and scope. We will return to this issue when we discuss the impacts of “imperialism” (colonialism) on Europe in the late nineteenth century.

Great Britain was also the first country to industrialize. This period from roughly the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century-- 1750-1850-- has been called a revolution, **the Industrial Revolution**.

The rise of England throughout the world might be referenced by way of England's long serving monarch, **Queen Victoria** (ruled from 1837-1901). Her name is associated not only with “**Victorian England**,” but also the **Victorian world** (the British Empire centered in India).

Social attitudes of the nineteenth century that underscored the rise of a prosperous “**middling sort**” (middle classes) and their fastidious social attitudes were called, “**Victorianism**.” Certain English writers would mock the attempts at respectable society in England during the hey-day of nineteenth-century civilization. Lytton Strachey, for one, published his work on the cultural world of the nineteenth century after that world had been destroyed by the first World War: *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, embodied much of the spirit of English politics during this time. Albert was no idle husband: Once hitched to Victoria, he immediately set himself to the task of social reform and public improvement. You should recall that the Revolutions of 1848 had underscored numerous social problems particularly among the working poor (**the Social Question**). Prince Albert developed ideas for public housing particularly in the context of his greatest achievement: The **Crystal Palace Exhibition** of 1851.

The Crystal Palace Exhibition was among a number of “Universal Expositions” that exhibited the material culture of the industrial world as each nation showcased the splendor of its industrial accomplishments. England hosted the first of these grand nineteenth century Expos in Hyde Park, London where a massive, spacious venue, the Crystal Palace, had been set up for the numerous national delegations, largely from Europe.

Second Empire France (1852-1870)

France's Second Republic lasted only briefly. It was soon succeeded by another authoritarian regime (the first had been Napoleon I's): The Second Empire. Napoleon I's nephew, who had been living in exile, returned in the tumult of 1848 and ran for the presidency of the **Second French Republic**. Having a famous name, especially influential in the countryside, **Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte** won the election and became President of the Republic. He would overthrow that same Republic in 1851 and in the following year declare the Second Empire. He ascended the throne as Napoleon III (out of respect for Napoleon I's son).

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's administration began as an out-right military dictatorship and eventually became a stable authoritarian regime that manufactured consent through manipulated votes (popular plebiscites). As the years went by, however, the regime relaxed controls and liberalized allowing genuine political competition. In 1866, for example, the Republican Party was allowed to run in elections (and proceeded to win control). Emile Ollivier, a former liberal critic of the regime (Republican), eventually became Prime Minister in 1869.

The most striking feature of the Second Empire was in finance, trade, economics-- and even architecture. A major free trade agreement was passed with England in 1860 (the **Cobden-Chevalier Free Trade Agreement**). New banks were created that helped to fund railroad construction and to cut canals. Paris, itself, received a major overhaul as broad new streets that still exist today were created-- the Grand Boulevards-- under **Baron Haussmann**. Mass merchandising and the modern retail sales were created; the first shopping centers were opened (*Au Bon Marche* in 1855).

The Second Empire, in short, was a period of successful modernization that lasted until the catastrophic defeat of France at the hands of Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). At the Battle of Sedan, Napoleon III was captured and his long-lived regime came to an end. **The Third Republic**-- lasting well into the 20th century (1940)-- would be its chief legacy.

England: Reform 1832-1867

Victorian England embraced a progressive political tradition. The two main political groupings in Parliament, the Whigs (Liberal Party-- by mid-century) and Tories (Conservative Party-- by mid-century) *agreed*, in fact, on a number of issues for public improvement. Why?

An entrenched aristocracy dominated English politics before and throughout the nineteenth century in *all its political groups and alliances*. Yet the English aristocracy possessed a notion of 'public service' and a sense of the **commonweal** (public good). The notion of active reform laws that benefited the public good in the course of England's nineteenth century has been called **Whig**

history, a history of public progress even if 'Whig history' is, in fact, a story of *cooperation* between English political groupings in the nineteenth century.

The most outstanding example of legislation being used to reconcile ordinary Britons to their government, the liberal tradition of political representation, was the **Reform Law of 1832**. Responding to the public campaign William Cobbett, the first Reform Act got rid of largely vacant electoral districts ("rotten boroughs") and expanded the franchise (the vote) among men (excluding women).

The Chartist Movement of the 1840s-- a mass petition movement-- pressed for specific reforms such as universal manhood suffrage, voting one's conscience (secret ballot), lifting income restrictions on the right to run as Minister of Parliament, salaries for MPs, equal electoral districts, and annual elections to the House of Commons. Nearly all of the aims in the People's Charter would be attained (not the last: annual elections). The 1832 law was not the last piece of reform legislation. The 1867 Reform Law built upon the foundation of previous legislation.

English Liberalism

As an idea, English liberalism stressed freedom in the context of social stability. John Stuart Mill in his classic essay, "On Liberty," underscored the importance of maintaining one's right to act as long as it did not infringe upon another's freedom or person (property or person). This careful statement of the extent of an individual's freedom showed a great deal of concern for the impact of individual actions on the public at large: Freedom must yield to law and order.

Mill's colleague, Jeremy Bentham, outlined the architecture for a "**Panopticon**"-- a building that would allow authorities to establish clear lines of sight throughout a structure to maintain policing authority. The Panopticon became a useful model for both the early nineteenth-century shopping center as well the modern penitentiary.

All this may seem as though English liberals supported police surveillance-- they, in fact, did support such measures in theory and in action. Yet, English liberals did so for the same reasons as all the legislators: They all claimed to be acting for the public good. English liberal political economists such as Mill referred to the **Principle of Utility** (usefulness): 'the greatest good for the greatest number' or to maximize 'happiness.'

An English Consensus

England, even to this day, is a society with *class consciousness*: Every English person knows where he or she stands in relation to another according to their socio-economic class. So why wasn't there conflict between classes in the middle-nineteenth century when continental Europe was in social revolt? Some reasons are listed above: A rising middling class, an active reform movement

with a responsive English government, and-- above all-- a liberal political culture (note the restrictions for law-and-order in liberalism). For all these reasons, England did not experience the tumult of social schism as other European societies experience in the middle-nineteenth century.