

Social Control in Victorian Britain

Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	
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Comprehension	Comments
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There is nothing particularly new about the observation that the social order in Britain was subjected to immense strains by the processes of **urbanization** and industrialization. It threatened at times to disintegrate into anarchy through the disruption of social ties and institutions, and the emergence of frighteningly large masses of apparently masterless men. And it was transformed in the course of the nineteenth century without suffering the collapse, or revolution, which many contemporaries from right and left, from Martineau to Marx, and Eldon to Engels, had anticipated with dread or **relish**. Neither is there anything particularly new in observing that those who have power, authority, and influence seek to use these to protect and preserve the state of things which gives them power, and to maintain the peaceful, and preferably contented, subordination of those less comfortable than themselves. What is **novel** is that in the last decade many social historians have approached a whole range of the activities of power-groups as exercises in devising mechanisms of social control which conditioned and manipulated the property-less masses into accepting and operating the forms and functions of behavior necessary to sustain the social order of an industrial society. Such efforts at social control are seen as playing an important, conceivably decisive, role in the formation and underpinning of bourgeois capitalist society. In such a view the success of social control in taming and civilizing the working classes in molds shaped to fit the needs of bourgeois society must take its place alongside the iron disciplines of wage labor, and the coercive power of the state, as a key factor in the shaping of modern society.

In many ways this is a curious view, placing the working classes perpetually on the receiving end of outside forces and influences, and portraying them as so much putty in the hands of a masterful and scheming bourgeoisie, a remote and powerful state, and a set of technological imperatives. It allows little for the possibility that the working classes themselves generated their own values and attitudes suited to the requirements of life in an industrial society, and imposed their own forms on middle-class institutions. The tables might be turned on embourgeoisement by social control by giving due weight to the autonomous development of working-class culture. Nevertheless, the recent flow of essays on social control from social historians, culminating in the publication of two volumes of papers devoted to the topic, has attained such proportions that it is opportune to review the claims made for the centrality of this concept for understanding the nineteenth century, and at the same time to offer some signposts towards a more tenable overall interpretation of the process of social transformation. This article, therefore, attempts to flavor a critical appraisal of a body of recent literature on social control with occasional more general pronouncements, whose *ex cathedra* character will, no doubt, provoke varying amounts of apoplexy and rebuttal.

Questions

1. According to the article, what are three things that have shaped modern society?
2. What does the author expect the response of fellow historians to be to his article?
3. What is the main argument this article is going to make?
4. According to the article, what is the only new argument historians have made in the last several decades about the effect of urbanization and industrialization on British society?
5. How does the author organize the first paragraph? What repetition does the author use to create that organization?
6. Why do you think this article is so challenging for you?

