

Social and Economic Class in 19th Century England

Pre-Capitalist Europe (moral and cultural background)

- feudal economy; primarily agrarian (workers not paid in wages)
- fear of paying wage earners too much; might lead to depravity
- profit seen as morally suspect (not charging a fair price)
- any investments are very, very conservative (little or no risk)
- money lending equated with usury

takeaway idea: Even though Europe was transitioning to a market economy from the high middle ages to the 18th century, cultural attitudes viewed making money (as opposed to inheriting money) as suspect.

Pre-Capitalist Europe (proto-capitalist institutions)

- craft guilds were anti-competitive
- prices and fees fixed by consensus; standards are set for good or service; innovations are discouraged
- the goal is not expand individual businesses, but to ensure the health of the trade and maintain its traditions

takeaway idea: Again, even proto-capitalist institutions embodied social ideas of tradition and risk aversion-- not competition and reward that characterize a market economy.

New Avenues of Social Mobility (new realities of the 18th and 19th century)

- technological innovations in the 18th and 19th century create new opportunities that allow for greater social mobility
- Richard Arkwright: poor son of a tailor; invents the spinning frame and carding engine; leaves a half million pound estate
- money replaces property as the measure of wealth; land is increasingly converted into cash; for the first time in England there is a widespread availability of land for sale
- in 1851 1/4 of all workers in England engaged in agriculture; by the end of the century it was 1/8

takeaway idea: The industrial revolution accelerated changes already underway. People woke up to the possibilities of a market economy, and traditional ways of life started to uproot.

New Avenues of Social Mobility (theoretical capitalism)

- Adam Smith: *Wealth of Nations* (describes emergent capitalism)
- the "hidden hand" of self-interest: self-interest motivates the capitalist to invest and compete; investment generates employment and increased revenue for all (wages, taxes); competition creates better products at lower prices (benefits consumer); self-interest, then, makes society better
- division of labor increases efficiency and productivity

takeaway idea: Adam Smith not only theorizes an emerging capitalist society, he defends it-- turning on its head the old cultural and moral suspicion of money making and commerce.

The Industrial Revolution (immediate effects)

- ~1760 - ~1840; old labor intensive ways of producing goods and services replaced by mechanization (driven by steam power, not human labor)
- factory owners and wealthy farmers able to lower costs of business (translates into wealth)
- livelihood of agricultural and textile workers threatened
- rise of factories and shift away from agriculture; new industries become more important (e.g., coal mining)

takeaway idea: There were winners and losers in this shift from labor intensive agriculture to industry. Capitalists could realize great profits, but ordinary workers no longer had guaranteed livelihoods. The new jobs (when they were available) raised standards of living for the working poor, but the trade-off was often in terms of more time spent away from home, boring and repetitive work, and unsafe working conditions.

The Industrial Revolution (secondary effects)

- displaced workers flock to cities looking for jobs or new opportunities
- 1801 17% of Europe lived in cities
- 1851 35% of Europe lived in cities
- 1891 54% of Europe lived in cities
- cities could not keep pace: over-crowding and sanitation problems
- increases in crime and desperate poverty

takeaway idea: Populations begin a shift from the countryside to the cities, farm work to factory work and urban occupations. Desperate poverty becomes a feature of daily life for many.

New Realities

- aristocrats could be property rich but money poor
- middle class entrepreneurs could make money but lack the social power of the traditional upper classes
- people could not only rise in social or economic status, but fall as well
- working classes could improve their standard of living, but there were usually trade-offs (longer hours, poor working conditions, health or safety)

takeaway idea: Industrialization made social mobility a reality, but at the cost of cultural ideas and traditions that had governed Europe for centuries.

Uncertainties

- What constitutes the upper classes? The moneyed class? The propertied class? The traditional aristocracy?
- Is social mobility a good thing? Is it morally suspect on some level?
- If conditions change, should society change as well? What should be retained from the past?
- What should society do with the losers in this new reality?

takeaway idea: Nobody knows what to make of these changes, which is why 18th and 19th century European literature seems so obsessed with social class. Nobody knew quite what to make of these historical and cultural changes