

Middle Class Culture of Respectability

Huggins, Mike J. "More Sinful Pleasures? Leisure, Respectability and the Male Middle Classes in Victorian England." *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2000, pp. 585-600.

First however we need to examine the ideology of respectability itself. The Victorian middle classes themselves were certainly keen to foster notions of respectability, and it had two major rhetorical thrusts. The first was hegemonic, stemming from middle-class fears of leisure's moral misuse by workers and pre-dominantly targeted not at themselves but at the workforce, most especially to encourage the emergence of the 'respectable working-man'. A second thrust was a generational one, aimed at discouraging middle-class youth from more sinful pleasures and curtailing potential leisure freedoms.

Whilst respectability was an extremely powerful rhetoric, *active* middle-class moralists and social reformers were always a small, although highly vociferous, minority. Their views were often shaped by evangelicalism, which saw the pursuit of pleasure and personal gratification as sinful, and duty and responsibility as central. 'Respectability' was "a creed and a code for the conduct of personal and family life," one which supposedly applied to all classes. Both non-conformists and Anglicans focused on sin, guilt and the possibility of redemption. Internal systems of cheeks and the external support of the clergy gave rules of conduct which helped the living of a spiritual life, while the family was central to the struggle to reform morals and manners. But non-conformist evangelicalism had a dwindling membership by mid-century despite the high proportion of upper middle-class members in its congregations, even though their views acted as a very useful and continuing rationale for notions of social control, rational recreation and social Darwinism.

Support was also drawn from the moral wing of mid-Victorian Liberalism, appealing to temperate, self-improving, respectable, and socially responsible citizens of all classes in the interests of progress, and attacking reactionary defenders of the status quo, those involved in drink, in betting, in brutal sports or lacking sexual restraint. Good citizenship, temperance, and firm commitment to the values of hearth and home were expected.

The ideology of middle-class respectability had become dominant by the 1840s, and, although slackening from the 1870s, was still powerful up to the century's end. It had some results, especially in terms of public rhetoric and public

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behaviour in some contexts. Certainly the upper classes adjusted their image to make it acceptable to middle-class morality. Its rhetoric, acting through preaching, the pages of the press, political platforms, and magistrate's pronouncements can be seen as a powerful agent of hegemony.

The two contexts where social pressure was strongest were the moral, Christian home, and those of church observance-- the Sunday schools, and chapel congregations. These were the places from which the public campaigns to attack immorality and support improving and uplifting rational recreations were mounted. Respectable public behavior was underpinned by fear of pressure from church, neighbours, friends and family within these communities. Certainly contents of mid-Victorian diaries or private letters often seem dictated by rules of propriety and lacking in spontaneity, with few personal confessions or mentions of non-respectable behaviour, although some later Victorian writers were prepared to concede that even in the world of the 1860s religiosity there was "a good deal of deliberate hypocrisy." For middle-class men who wished to join the social elite of their town, attendance at the right chapel, wealth, involvement in charitable or philanthropic affairs, and the holding of public office were a common route to local fame and reputation; so respectability paid. [...]

In supporting mid-Victorian middle-class respectability the *gender* dimension played a crucial part. Respectability was predominately both constructed and maintained by women, and therefore in conflict both with some definitions of 'masculinity', and notions of double standards. Certainly men apparently led, publicised, recruited and organised churches, chapels and evangelical institutions, and certainly by the 1850s ministers and spiritual guides. But it was the women of the congregation who largely drew up the rules of propriety, decorum and morality, and exercised control or influence over the behaviour of their children. Women acted as ideological filters and transmitters, upheld local 'standards' developed the appropriate language and exercised class-based judgements about associational life. They defined appropriate protocols for children's behaviour, or the acceptability or non-acceptability of acquaintances. They were significant players in managing and controlling class relationships, engaged in nuanced elaborations of social distinction that subtly defined and demarcated the boundaries and internal divisions of middle-class life. Women, especially mothers, ruled the private sphere,

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acting as gatekeepers, regulating family activities in a context of fear of local disapproval which determined the mores by which families lived in the middle-class neighbourhood.

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