Victorian Society and the Time Machine

Class Stratification and the Industrial Revolution

At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age it seemed... that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position. (Wells, 40)

The rapid advancements of science and technology in 19th century England paved the way for the Industrial Revolution, the rise of mass-production, factories, and an increased sense of capitalism. This period marked the rise of the middle class, people who were able to generate their own wealth without royal title or relation to the aristocracy.[5]

However, despite the rise of a British middle class, the vast majority of British citizens belonged in the working class as skilled or unskilled laborers. The rise of the industrialized factory also led to the rise of sweatshop labor, and working conditions for the laborers were often dirty, dangerous, and underpaid. The lack of adequate education for the underclasses made economic and social mobility difficult. The wealth gap grew exponentially, as the working masses were often poorly paid with no minimum wages. [5]

Wells, aware of the ever increasing gap between the upper and lower classes, made it a central issue in The Time Traveler. The Eloi, the first beings that The Time Traveler encounters, represent the aristocratic leisure class. As the aristocracy had enough wealth to maintain their standard of living, and generated more through the founding and purchasing of companies and factories, they did not have to claim a profession, and instead spent their time invested in leisurely activities.[4]

The Middle class, with newly acquired wealth, also began to prioritize leisurely activities, perhaps as a response to growing class tensions and the mobilization of the working classes to demand more rights. Social organizations and clubs arose, from sports clubs to philanthropic organizations meant to aid in alleviating the suffering of the impoverished underclasses.[4]

So, in the end, above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots; the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour...It had been no such triumph of moral education and general co-operation as I had imagined. Instead, I saw a real aristocracy, armed with a perfected science and working to a logical conclusion the industrial system of today (Wells, 41)

If the Eloi represented the upper class, the elites of what was once human society, then the Morlocks, in their subterranean, mechanical, underworld represent the oppressed working class, providing the Eloi with the materials needed for them to pursue their leisurely activities. In Victorian England, the lower classes, the skilled workmen and the impoverished under class, were excluded from the political process and not given equal educational opportunities as those of the middle and elite. This exclusion led to numbers of workmen forming trade unions to grant more rights to the working classes, and while trade unions began to take hold in the Victorian era, laborers continued to face political exclusion and dismal working conditions. Growing frustration and anger towards the upper and middle classes led to the rise of socialism as a force of the proletariat, and gained considerable traction in European and American working classes.[4]

Social Darwinism

After Darwin’s publication of On the Origins of Species in 1858, his principles of evolution were also applied to social and economic issues. The “only the strong survive” mantra of Darwinism was applied to justify British colonialism and Imperialism under the rationale that more advanced and civilized countries were destined to rule over more primitive societies. Thus, the white industrialized European was place at the top of a racial and social hierarchy and supported program enacted during the Victorian era to “civilize” colonial subjects through increased exposure to Victorian culture and literature, namely through education programs that place English literature on a pedestal that taught British moral values. However, though social Darwinism contains Charles Darwin’s name and basic principles of evolution, the concept of Social Darwinism was advocated by philosopher Herbert Spencer.[2]
Social Darwinism was also used by the British aristocracy in relation to British class and society as well, viewing themselves as morally superior to the working masses. Thomas Malthus, a prominent social Darwinist in Britain during the Victorian period, stressed that the working classes and the unskilled underclasses did not possess the capacities to match the moral principles of their refined, education upperclassmen.[2]

Social welfare programs, designed to help alleviate poverty and provide sustenance to the labor class were viewed as futile and unnecessary, that they went against nature and should not be continued. This became the major underlying principle of the issues of population control in Victorian England.[3]

**Socialism and Utopia**

“Then there is a future,” said the Very Young Man. “Just think! One might invest all one’s money, leave it to accumulate at interest, and hurry on ahead!”

“To discover a society,” said I, “erected on a strictly communistic basis. (Wells, 8)”

At the writing of The Time Machine, H.G. Wells described himself as a socialist, criticizing unchecked capitalism and the exploitation of the working class. He was, for a time, a member of the Fabian society, a British socialist organization founded in 1884. The Fabian Society was labeled as democratic socialists, as opposed to the utopian socialism also popular in England, especially amongst the labor classes, in the 19th century. The Fabian society supported a minimum wage for workers, national education, and health services for the working class. They believed in reforming British imperialism, but did not oppose it.

The two strains of socialism, though similar in many ways, had stark differences. Utopian socialists believed in the dismantling of social classes, giving everyone the same amount of power under the government, and no private property, everything was owned collectively. Democratic socialists preferred a more even disbursement of wealth and resources across the population and some private land ownership.[1]

Read more about Utopian Socialism and Democratic Socialism.

Social triumphs, too, had been effected. I saw mankind housed in splendid shelters, gloriously clothed, and as yet I had found them engaged in no toil. There were no signs of struggle, neither economic nor economical struggle. (Wells, 25)

Prior to his voyage into the future, the Time Traveler revels in the idea of a mankind in a form of Utopian Socialism, a communistic society where currency is no longer necessary. Upon meeting the Eloi, he initially believes he has discovered such a society, though on the decline. The Eloi live communally in massive structures, there is no economic or social struggle or competition, and there is enough sustenance for the entire population. However, his encounter with the Morlocks complicates his theory, and he then recognizes the descendents of the aristocratic leisure class of his own period, and the Morlocks the labor class, toiling to support the lifestyle of the elite. He changes his theory further in the ventilation shaft, realizing that at some point thousands of years before, the Morlocks had rebelled against their subservient position, changing the balance of power to their favor. From their subterranean structures, they supplied the Eloi with clothes and necessities, allowing them to live their lives of leisure, before eating them. The Time Traveler relates this relationship to raising livestock for consumption.

The upper-world people might once have been the favored aristocracy, and the Morlocks their mechanical servants; but had long since passed away. The two species that had resulted from the evolution of man were sliding down towards, or had already arrived at, and altogether new relationship...thousands of generations ago, man had thrust his brother man out of the ease and the sunshine. And not that brother was coming back-changed! (Wells, 46-47)

**Population Control**

It was natural on that golden evening that I should jump at the idea of a social paradise. The difficult of increasing population had been met, I guessed, and the population had ceased to increase. (Wells, 27)
With London expanding dramatically, both from immigration and a falling mortality rate, fears emerged that, if left unchecked, the human population would continually increase, spiraling out of control, beyond the means capable of producing enough food and resources to sustain them. This theory specifically pointed to the growing numbers of poor, who depended on charity and aid to survive, yet the numbers of poor continually grew higher and higher.

As this fear took hold, calls arose for preventive methods to curb population growth. The three preventive measures proposed by Thomas Malthus included: Moral Restraint, vice, and birth control.

Moral control was thought only to be used by the upper classes, as the teeming, impoverished masses were not believed to be capable of exercising this type of preventive method. Moral restraint mean controlling the number of children born to a family, thus the family’s wealth would not get over distributed, and the inheritors could continue living comfortable lives, without falling into poverty.[3]

Vice and birth control were the options available to the poor. Charity and aid was not recommended, as families depending on aid would continue giving birth to children, who would in turn require aid to survive.

“All the children born, beyond what would be required to keep up the population to this level, must necessarily perish, unless room be made for them by the deaths of grown persons. ... To act consistently, therefore, we should facilitate, instead of foolishly and vainly endeavoring to impede, the operation of nature in producing this mortality, and if we dread the too frequent visitation of the horrid form of famine, we should sedulously encourage the other forms of destruction, which we compel nature to use.” – Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population.[3]

Malthus also believed that natural forces, such as war, famine and disease, were necessary to aid in curbing global human population, which would continually increase without natural methods of population check. He believed that diseases should run their course, and that the poor should be put into close, crowded quarters to encourage the spread of disease. There were coined positive checks, as they raised the death rate.[3]

Sources