

Civilization (Major Students) Lecture 6

Topic: The Cultural, Social and Economic Condition in 19th century England.

The huge changes that took place in the British – and European society – in the 19th century cannot be ascribed to one factor. There is, of course, the scientific revolution in the 16th century and the industrial revolution in the 18th century which changed England from a rural country to one of the biggest urban centers in the world. The great migration of peasants from the countryside to the cities turned London and Manchester to huge cities. This development was not, nevertheless, accompanied by progress in the lives of the urban workers. Conditions were described by the social and economic commentators of the 19th century as “horrible.”

The workers who escaped from poverty in the country came to poverty, squalid conditions and unsanitary lives in cities. There were many attempts to ameliorate the “terrible” conditions of urban lives in the 19th century. The consecutive British governments – both Tories and Whigs – attempted to overcome these problems. Solutions ranged from social programs, economic reforms, new laws that reduce the amount of work as well as lifting many legal restrictions on importation.

These reforms led to the reduction of the price of the work week and hours, the decrease of the price of corn, the introduction of paid vacations and the betterment of social and economic conditions. These legal, social and economic reforms started in the thought of many philanthropists and intellectuals in the 19th century who realized that conditions cannot go on like this forever. If a bunch of clear and immediate solutions is not introduced, the continual worsening of the living conditions forebodes a disaster. Overcoming the disaster meant that the industrial bourgeoisie has to overcome their self-interest and accept more egalitarian laws as well as social and economic laws which may not be to their liking.

On the other hand, the increasing tension between the neighboring European nations was escalating to an unprecedented measure. The idea of linking royal houses through marriage proved to be unsuccessful in reducing the tension. War – to be discussed in the 20th century course – seemed to many politicians a probable solution to the endless internal tensions in each nation. The solution to the British problem was, hence, two fold; internal and external.