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The Victorian Period

Queen Victoria reigned over England for 64 years (1837–1901). Politically, it was the age of the middle class with their belief in the Laissez-Faire theory. It was a dominant economic and political ideology during the Victorian Age. It emphasized minimal government intervention in the economy, allowing businesses to operate freely under the laws of supply and demand. The term itself, which translates to "let do" or "let it be", reflects the belief that markets function best when left to regulate themselves without government interference.

Economically, following the Industrial Revolution, there were periods of Prosperity and periods of Depression. Socially, there was much agitation with the chartist movement (1839-1857); a working class movement demanding the right to vote and enter parliament. It appeared as a reaction to the reform act of 1832 which gave political power to the middle class only. Chartism was a very popular movement but it failed to achieve its immediate goals mainly because of the disagreement between its leaders and also because of the lack of education and political maturity of the workers. With the failure of Chartism to obtain political rights, social harmony prevailed in England from 1851 to the beginning of the 20th Century.

1. Victorian Prosperity (1851- 1873)

1851 is a basic date of the 19th Century because it was the symbol of great achievements. Chartism had died, great inventions were encouraging industrial production, medicine was developing particularly with the use of chloroform. The railway was cheap (holidays by the sea were a possibility for many people). In the towns, main streets were paved and better cleaned. In London for example, life at night was safer because there was street lighting (using gas and petroleum), and travel was easier as there were more hordedriven carriages and the omnibus. All this material prosperity was demonstrated by the great exhibition of 1851 where people from the entire world came to see the high level of development England had reached. More than 7000 British producers brought their goods to the exhibition. This exhibition revealed the tact of the middle class or Victorian Britain. There was in all the articles (even everyday articles) no simplicity; on the contrary, there was an over ornamentation. In fact, the Victorians gave more importance to comfort, solidity, and security than to

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beauty and elegance. Even the amusements were more moderate and quiet than in the early 19th Century. For example, cock-fighting as a game had totally disappeared.

The prosperity of Victorian England started in 1851 and ended in 1873. Those twenty-two years were also marked by population growth, increasing production in industry and agriculture and the colonisation of India (Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1877). The problem was that England was more successful in economic affairs and trade than in social justice. Behind peace and wealth, there still existed great misery, ignorance, poverty, degradation although some laws were passed by the Middle Class concerning work in the factory or education of the children. The period of Victorian prosperity, was a period of harmony in the sense that all the classes believed in two virtues or qualities: thrift and self-help. All the country believed in these Victorian values and their most famous defender was Samuel Smiles with his book Self-Help (1859). He said that to progress and improve its conditions, the Working Class in particular should adopt Victorian values as saving, self-help, hard work, competition and religious virtues. These values had made of England a great and wealthy country. It is also by practising these values that the Middle Class raised into power and prosperity, according to Smiles.

Belief in Victorian values especially self-help led to the emergence of various associations such as the Savings Banks where small sums of money could be deposited and people receive a small interest. In this, the government encouraged people to save and practise thrift. In addition to Savings Banks there were Friendly Societies. Their aim was to provide help in times of trouble (sickness, accident, unemployment, old age, and death). They also provided enjoyment through friendly clubs where the members could meet to eat or drink. It is clear that the members of Friendly Societies saved out of their wages, therefore, these societies concerned people who were working. They existed and functioned in England until the beginning of the 20th Century when social security became the responsibility of the government. Finally, Victorian England was famous for its cooperative societies for consumers. Money was collected from the workers, then, a place was rented in which goods like butter, eggs or tea were sold at a low price. The goods went directly from the producers to the consumers. All these solutions were a demonstration of the spirit of solidarity that was developing among the working class especially with the Laissez-faire policy. In addition to that, the working

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class social organisation was proof that people accepted industrialism and adapted themselves to it.

2. Period of Depression (1873–1896)

Prosperity ended in 1873 and the Depression, which started was mostly due to the competition of America and Germany. Although the British production was still high, the American and German production was much higher. This was particularly obvious in industries like iron, coal and steel. For example German coal production increased by 53% between 1873 and 1883 while that of Britain increased by 29%. In addition, the enormous demand of foreign countries for British iron and steel to build the railway, of the preceding years decreased because America and Europe could now produce great quantities of their own iron and steel. Finally and most importantly, England did not understand that the energy of the future was electricity. Unlike the Germans and Americans who very early used electricity as a source of power, heat and source of light. England, still interested in steam power, was too slow to change her way. When she finally came to use electricity for tramways and thus replace the horse, and when she came to use the telephone (an American invention) or use the car (a German invention) in the very last years of the 19th century, Americans and Germans were far ahead.

As a conclusion, we may say that England at the end of the 19th Century was prosperous especially as she had been colonising India, Egypt and South Africa, but she was no longer the leader. When the WWI started in 1914, England, who used to be predominant, now stood among equals.

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