

This picture is dramatized and in some ways idealized (not that Thackeray was short of cynicism). But it tells us how contemporaries saw their social system working. Information about people's behaviour could percolate up, and especially down, the social hierarchy. And, as in Caroline Lamb's real life, a bad character was catching: Becky is judged by the company she keeps, and herself becomes inappropriate company for others.¹⁸⁶

Civilizing crusades

The upper and middle classes brought their own children up in the cultural hothouse. But they also made a great effort to spread these habits down the social scale, to servants and workers, and especially to the emergent proletariat in the great industrial cities. They founded institutions for moral education, including charity schools, Sunday schools, reform schools and board schools. They tried to encourage church attendance. They handed out Bibles and books, and gave lectures. They visited the poor and told them how to behave.

These civilizing crusades started contemporaneously with print religion, and at first had a purely religious motive. * Early Lutherans had soon enlisted the aid of princes to provide education to children. The Puritans' goal was to enlighten their countrymen, so as to reform their hearts and their "manners". This goal was taken up again in the eighteenth century by the Religious Societies and Society for the Reformation of Manners. The former were a kind of club that focused on peer encouragement. The latter tried, not very successfully, to spread reformed behaviour to the rest of society.¹⁸⁷

Why did they do this? The ultimate *causes* were their interests. Individual employers needed reliable workmen who would turn up on time, work hard, and stay sober. This motivation varied among different groups. Farmers, for instance, were notoriously

*Modern historians and sociologists sometimes call them "civilizing offensives". I don't use this label, because it prejudges the issue of whether these initiatives were a politically-motivated class war. See below.

against teaching farm labourers to read or write, because this would enable them to seek work in the city, which would drive up the price of labour on the farm.¹⁸⁸ Manufacturers, on the other hand, needed reliable hands if not literate ones, so they were keen, for example, to employ workers recommended by the Sunday Schools. Collectively, elites also had a class interest in preventing revolution. Especially after the French Revolution, the British upper classes believed that the social order was in danger. One way to protect themselves was by teaching the working classes appropriate beliefs, in the wisdom of the current order of things, including the division between rich and poor, and the wrongness of attempts to change it collectively, by riots, strikes or revolution.

As before, causes are not reasons. Elite interests only took effect by supporting the elite's *reasons* to act, which took the form of specific ideas and ideals. First, there was the religious duty of bringing people to Christ. A second ideal, that of social progress here on earth, became increasingly important during the nineteenth century. The upper class's ideas of how to protect themselves against social revolution also varied. One argument was that giving the poor any education was dangerous: it would provide them with skills they could not use, make them dissatisfied with their station in life, and allow them to read seditious texts.¹⁸⁹ This was a minority view, though. Especially, it ran up against the religious belief, particularly in Protestant countries, that literacy was necessary for Bible-reading. In any case, most privileged people thought that the right kind of education would be a prophylactic against revolution. Wordsworth was typical, when he called for state-funded education, in putting enlightened self-interest and ideals on the same side:

... so that none,

However destitute, be left to droop

By timely culture unsustained; or run

Into a wild disorder; or be forced

To drudge through a weary life without the help

Of intellectual implements and tools;
A savage horde among the civilized,
A servile band among the lordly free!

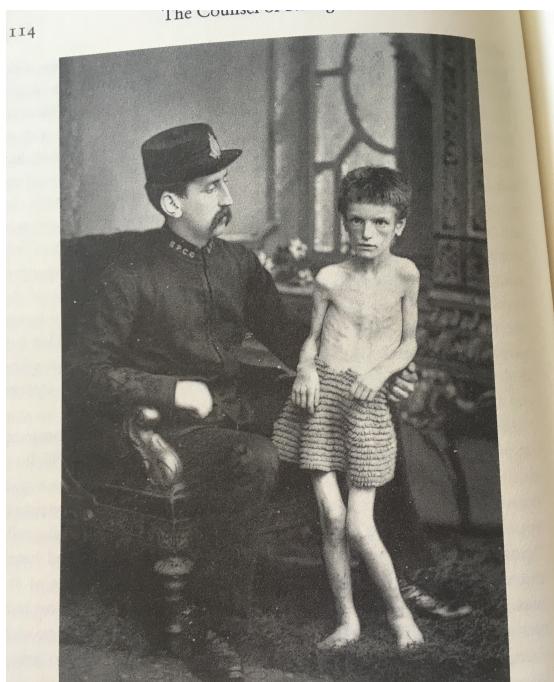
To understand what civilizing crusades were for, we need to see what they were against. They were campaigns to improve the moral condition of the masses. But moral conditions were deeply intertwined with material poverty, and the crusades tended to fight against both moral and material poverty together, though individual campaigns differed in emphasis. Material poverty in the countryside meant living in a tiny cottage with a mud or thatch roof; in the city, with several family members in a single poorly-ventilated room. It meant having few and poorly-made clothes, not enough food, and the risk of real starvation if a family member lost a job. It meant having no savings to pay the doctor if a child got ill. It meant children having to go to work very early. The material poverty of the poor in Western societies at this period was the poverty we see in developing countries today. Moral poverty meant drunkenness, hopelessness, dirt, violence, ignorance, irreligion and sexual immorality. The two kinds of poverty were mutually reinforcing. Material poverty led to moral poverty. The classic example is that incest (child abuse), which contemporaries thought was a serious problem among the poor, was more likely when relatives had to share a bed. Another example is that children who went out to work could not learn to read. Social reformers knew this chain of causation, or discovered it as they tried to help. Much of Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* is about the material conditions that led to the moral degradation of the poor. One impulse behind egalitarianism was that people could not be made better morally without being made materially better off. "Talk of morality amongst people who herd... in one narrow, confined apartment! You might as well talk of cleanliness in a sty," wrote a doctor; "People do not drink so much if there are light and comfort at home," a teacher in a Board school. Repeatedly, moral crusades developed a material aspect. Religious missionaries found that alcoholism was

a stumbling-block to receiving the gospel, so they founded Temperance Societies. To get working class households clean, health visitors took to selling samples of carbolic acid, a powerful disinfectant. The modern institution of the district nurse evolved from a Bible Mission which moved from selling bibles towards preparing meals and cleaning houses, and then into providing medical care, partly because their visitees needed and appreciated these practical, skilled services. By the end of the 19th century, the English public was said to have “learnt that morality is largely a question of health and temperament and environment.”¹⁹⁰

Causality also went the other way: moral poverty led to material poverty. A known drunk might lose his job and not find another; drinking consumed wages too. “A shilling goes further with a poor couple that’s sober than two shillings does with a drunkard,” as one London woman put it.¹⁹¹ Dirt in the home put families at risk of disease. Sex outside marriage risked pregnancy, without male wages to raise the children. Contemporary social reformers knew this too. Modern historians find it harder to grasp.

Against this background, the crusaders believed in both moral and material progress, without distinguishing between them. Progress meant both that farm workers would live in better-built cottages, and that the cottages would be kept clean, their inhabitants be sober and the children learning to read. Social progress was linked to the progress of the individual soul. In the minds of eighteenth-century evangelicals, Godliness had come to mean more than keeping Jehovah’s commandments: it was a process of becoming “like-minded with Christ,” a kind of spiritual development.¹⁹² Thomas Arnold believed that the Kingdom of God must be realized within actual earthly societies; this led to his earnest campaign to reform the public schools, but also to his opposing Jewish emancipation, since Church and State could not and should not be wholly separate.

The civilizing crusades were not just something done by elites to the masses. The working class responded, as individuals and collectively. Again, the response was



Entitled "Famine," this turn-of-the-century pose features a "cruelty man" from the NSPCC supporting a victim of parental neglect. In practice, separating criminal ne-

A NSPCC inspector with a child. This picture embodies some of the tensions of the civilizing crusade, between interference and indifference, formality and informality, legality and care.

shaped by their interests and mediated by ideas. Individually, workers had a worldly interest in success, since class membership was not fixed and individuals hoped to make themselves better off. This led them to demand education for their children. For most of this period, most children's education was private and paid for by parents. This might be very basic, as in the English "dame schools", which were often little more than child-minding services. Individual demand was also more focused on practical skills, like literacy, than on edification in Christian doctrine. Remember the toolkit: edification works by mixing ideas that benefit society with ideas that benefit the individual. While children cannot distinguish the two, their parents may be better able to, especially when the moral ideas that benefit society have a certain class slant. Hence, Sunday schools that would not teach writing on the Sabbath lost pupils to other schools that would. As one reformer bitterly observed, many parents would have no problem with religious instruction in "the principles of Mahomet, or the worship of blocks and stones", so long as fees were low enough. Overall, the schools founded by the various churches were more successful at teaching basic skills than they were at creating new churchgoers. This peaceful conflict over curriculum was not just a matter of class versus class; it was also individual versus collective. The Sunday schools founded by the radical Owenites, which taught a social doctrine arguably more in line with working class collective interests, were no better able to attract members and did not survive beyond the 1840s. A basic criticism thrown by reformers at the cheap private "dame" and "venture" schools of the nineteenth century was that they did not bother enough with moral teaching. That is, they taught what benefited the individual not the society as a whole.¹⁹³

However, the working class did also articulate its own *collective* interests. As in almost any social conflict, these interests could lead to cooperation as well as competition. Elites would be collectively better off if workers were taught useful skills, as well as a proper sense of subordination, the justness of the division of property, and

the wickedness of striking for higher wages. The working class would be better off if workers were taught useful skills, as well as a sense of the justness of labour's demands, the wickedness of the rich, and the skills necessary for political action. Since most negotiation and conflict takes place between these points, they not surprisingly capture much of the contemporary debate and of later historians' attention. But there is also an element of cooperation. No education at all would be the worst outcome of all for everyone. Workers are better off even with education on the terms offered by the elites. That is why many workers eagerly took up the education offered by the National Schools Society, which was offered by the Church of England and contained plenty of material endorsing the status quo.¹⁹⁴ Elites are better off even if education is on the workers' terms. That is why the British government gave money to the British and Foreign Schools Society, run by dissenters and likely to be critical of the established order and its church. The different classes were in what modern management gurus call co-opetition.

While you might think that the elites would have it all their own way, this ignores the principal-agent problems they faced in shaping education the way they wanted. Parents, as paying customers, could exercise choice over Sunday school curriculums. By contrast, the government that funded religious schools could not, in practice, monitor what was being taught. In Prussia, after the Napoleonic period, the central government was constantly concerned to teach obedience to the lawful sovereign. But this authoritarian goal was frustrated by the teachers themselves, who were much more progressive. After the 1848 revolution, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV bitterly accused the profession of "undermining" the regime, and many teachers were jailed, exiled or fired.¹⁹⁵

Working-class radicals knew as well as anyone that the welfare of the poor depended on moral as well as material progress. Many campaigns of the civilizing crusade came from below. The Mechanics' Institutes were for adult self-education. The

Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was a secularist, radical version of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge. The teetotal movement, a radical wing of the temperance movement which demanded total abstinence, was founded in Preston. Its early membership was working class, at a time when Parliament was more supportive of the interests of beer house owners. Livesey, one of the founders, recalled in 1867: “We seemed as if we would turn the world upside down.... Our working men – sawyers, mechanics, and men of all trades – were constant speakers at the meetings; they went everywhere and no others were listened to with equal attention.”¹⁹⁶

Working-class political organizations were also imbued with the language and ideas of the hothouse. The Old Testament is full of language inveighing against the oppressions of the wealthy and demanding social justice, and this was grist for reformers’ mill. One tactic of Chartist radicals was to assemble on Sunday, arrive at church early, take the free seats – ignoring the convention that the best were reserved for wealthier parishioners who paid for them – and even sometimes suggest a text for the service. Maybe “Go to now, ye rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you” (James 5:1). Meetings of the farm labourers’ union would begin with hymns like ‘Hold the Fort’ or ‘Dare to be a Daniel’. Socialist politicians in Britain were famously more likely to quote the Bible than Marx. Lloyd George honed his rhetoric at Methodist meetings, speaking against the established Church in Wales.¹⁹⁷

Working class people became involved in civilizing crusades for another reason: they often had indispensable local knowledge and credibility. In 1860s London, the Ranyard Bible Mission began to use local poor people to sell Bibles. It was these representatives who started to offer more practical forms of help, like preparing meals or cleaning floors, and then moved into health work, often with the terminally ill. Similarly, health visitors to homes with infant children were often working-class women, who were seen as the “missing link” between the good intentions of the middle classes, and the culture they were working in. Again, this ground-level involvement of ordinary

people gave them the opportunity to shape the work of voluntary organizations towards what they saw as effective.¹⁹⁸

What did these civilizing crusades achieve? Although progress was extremely slow, people at the time believed that they had an effect. Francis Place wrote the *Improvement of the Working People* describing the changes over his lifetime, in terms of “the acquisition of knowledge” and “reformation of manners”. William Huskisson MP, speaking in Parliament in 1822, said “no person who had lived so long as he had but must perceive that a greater degree of sobriety prevailed amongst the lower classes now than was formerly the case”. (Huskisson himself was run over and killed by that emblem of technological progress, Stephenson’s *Rocket*. This belief in moral improvement continued through to the early twentieth century. Charles Booth, the pioneering social investigator who knew more than most about the condition of the poor, said in the 1890s of board schools in the East End of London: “habits of order and cleanliness have been formed”).¹⁹⁹

It is often said that complaints about declining moral standards are perennial. A classic example is “We have fallen upon evil times and the world has waxed very old and wicked. Politics are very corrupt. Children are no longer respectful to their parents,” words allegedly written on an Akkadian stone tablet from 3800 BC . In fact, this is untrue. The Victorians believed their societies were getting better materially and morally. To them, these were two aspects of a single process. They would have thought it very strange to separate material progress out and quantify it in GDP numbers. Macaulay, the period’s great optimist, described English history since the Glorious Revolution as “the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement.”²⁰⁰