

## NOTES

1. Antoinette Burton, *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), 278.
2. Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 13.
3. Thomas Keneally, *Australians: Eureka to the Diggers* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2011), 11.
4. "Fainting by the Way," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 1, 1861, 3.
5. "Reported Discovery of Burke and of his Companions," *Illawarra Mercury*, October 1, 1861, 4.
6. "Verses. By Henry Kendall. (Unpublished.)," *Athenaeum*, September 27, 1862, 395.
7. W. T. Stead, "To All English-Speaking Folk," *Review of Reviews* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1890): 19.
8. W. T. Stead, "The Reviews Reviewed: *The Indian World*," *Review of Reviews* 32, no. 187 (1995): 83.



## Class

DEBORAH EPSTEIN NORD

IN 1958 Raymond Williams offered five keywords for understanding the last decades of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth: class, industry, democracy, art, and culture.<sup>1</sup> Though these are all obviously interrelated, the first three are deeply connected and, indeed, inseparable in a way that not only helps to demonstrate why "class" dominated analysis of the Victorian period in the past but also suggests why the term is crucial to grasping what the Victorians themselves were thinking about and zealously trying to comprehend. Without industry, there was no industrial working class and no manufacturing class, the two segments of a new social order that most confounded observers and reformers. Without a rising working class, there would have been no Chartism and no 1832 Reform Bill, the first, if radically incomplete, step to representative democracy. If the term and its variants loomed large in the literature of the Victorian age and only slightly less large in the birth of Victorian Studies, the

interdisciplinary movement of the mid-to-late twentieth century, it has fallen out of favor in recent decades. I lament its passing and long to see it revived as an important focus of literary and cultural analysis.

How did the division of society into distinct strata animate the Victorian imagination? Why did this Victorian obsession form the basis for an interdisciplinary Victorian Studies? And how has the idea of class recently been eclipsed—or erased—in literary study of the period? To begin with the second question first: The work of Victorianists in the U. K. reflected both the influence of Marxism and the consciousness of an enduring class system. Cultural materialists like Williams and critics of the novel like Arnold Kettle, Peter Keating, John Lucas, John Goode, and (the young) Terry Eagleton stressed the centrality of class to Victorian writing and, with it, politics, political ideology, class conflict, and what Williams importantly called “structures of feeling.”<sup>2</sup> In traditionally American fashion, U. S. critics came less easily to the subject of class, but a commitment to interdisciplinarity in the early days of Victorian Studies meant that their historicist approach to literature insured an inescapable alertness to class and, perhaps to a lesser degree than their U. K. counterparts, politics.

Marx and Engels may have provided the conceptual and ideological frame for mid-century critics, especially British ones, to think about culture generally, but Marx and Engels were also eminently appropriate guides to the very decades that formed them and their vision of history. They were products of their time, to understate the case, not just because they crafted their philosophy of social change and revolution in response to the realities of nineteenth-century industrialization and the creation of industrial cities but because they were engaged in an enterprise that was almost identical to that of their British contemporaries: charting, defining, and choreographing the formation of classes in the industrial period. As Marx and Engels would have it, new modes of production and exchange—industrial manufacture and capitalism—laid the ground for the rise of two new classes. Both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie emerged out of a long evolutionary process of invention, navigation, industry, trade, and the modern state.<sup>3</sup> But the advent of these two classes was of slightly less importance to the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* than delineating the relationship between them. And this constituted their most important hypothesis: that these two groups stood in perpetual opposition to one another, in a relation of conflict, antagonism, exploitation, oppression, struggle, and warfare.

If for Marx and Engels this history of class struggle would end eventually in a proletarian revolution and the violent overthrow of the

bourgeoisie, for their English contemporaries, Raymond Williams reminded us about the literature of 1848 and after, some form of reconciliation, change of heart, or recognition of common humanity might be an achievable antidote to callousness and class conflict.<sup>4</sup> Many novelists evaded altogether the implications of the “intense, overt class consciousness” of this era, while others sought to solve it superficially, through the plot conventions of the “fortunate legacy” or the fantastical cross-class marriage.<sup>5</sup> Dickens, in a different and deeper mode, sought to promote reconciliation through the renovation of the reader’s spirit, while the Gaskell of *Mary Barton* managed to expose her readers directly to imagined experiences of loss and grief in the lives of impoverished, mourning, and often starving industrial workers.<sup>6</sup> What Rosemarie Bodenheimer called the “politics of story” was accompanied by what Williams called “deep form” and inventive modes of transforming the reader.<sup>7</sup>

Whether because of sympathy, recognition of abuse, or outright fear of the consequences of social strife and the very possibility of revolution, Victorian writers embraced the vatic role of chastising the exploiters, hectoring or consoling the exploited, and prophesying change. They also habitually classified and named the various strata of society in an effort to identify and, perhaps, contain them, but their nomenclature (Matthew Arnold’s word) was not that of Marx and Engels.<sup>8</sup> Industrial observers regularly called the Marxian bourgeoisie and proletariat “masters and men” and factory workers “hands.” Mayhew referred to middle-class urban dwellers and the lumpenproletariat as “settlers” and “wanderers” or “wandering tribes.”<sup>9</sup> Arnold’s aristocrats were “Barbarians,” his middle class “Philistines,” and his working class the “Populace.”<sup>10</sup> For the Carlyle of *Past and Present* (1843), who favored identifying class beliefs, sensibilities, and habits rather than classes themselves, associated the Gospel of Mammonism with the middle class (or the “Working Aristocracy”) and the Gospel of Dilettantism with the aristocracy or governing class.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, perhaps because he valued labor as an ideal in itself and was ultimately concerned with how to recognize the heroes or ideal rulers of society, who would come, he believed, from the upper ranks or Captains of Industry, he did not invent a totalizing epithet for working-class habits and attitudes, at least not at this stage of his career.

It is worth noting that neither Carlyle’s nor Arnold’s notion of class was a static one: the dynamic of change built into each of their systems of classification expressed a crucial belief in—or, at least, aspiration toward—reform, perhaps even radical change. By shedding the worst excesses of Mammonism (“Supply-and-demand, Competition,

Laissez-faire, Devil take the hindmost”), absorbing the admonitions and threats of trades-unions and Chartists, and heeding their own astute sense of “the facts of things,” Carlyle’s Working Aristocracy would “assuredly reform themselves, and a working world will be possible.”<sup>12</sup> In Arnold’s drastically non-Marxian scheme, class consciousness would fall away from some of the elect and they, the “aliens” in each class, would escape their ordinary selves to cultivate their best and band together with other classless individuals to govern wisely and humanely.<sup>13</sup>

If, as I imagine, class has dropped out of our analyses of Victorian texts, what are the reasons for this disappearance? Among them: the ascendancy of categories of race, gender, and sexuality; a shift in focus from nation to empire and then globe; the discrediting of Marxist criticism in the wake of Communism’s decline; the weakening of the labor movement in the U. S.; a Foucauldian emphasis on discourse (the linguistic turn) and the impossibility of group or class-based mobilization and resistance; a critical emphasis on types of “reading” and form rather than ideology, covert meaning, and literature as Jeremiad; and (perhaps) our own American allergy, in this season especially virulent, to seeing class.<sup>14</sup>

I realize that to recommend the resurrection of class as a focus for criticism risks too backward-looking a stance. To disregard the Victorians’ obsession with class, their consciousness of living through seismic shifts in class arrangements, their imaginative transmutation into literature of the anxieties, opportunities, and sheer drama inherent in social change, and their vision of a renovated society also, however, carries risks. We might deny thereby not only the essence of a period of history and the achievements of its literature but also the crises of our own volatile age.

#### NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961), 13–15.
2. Williams, *Culture*, 99.
3. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: International Publishers, 2016), 9–11. Marx and Engels’s account of the evolutionary process of industrialization in *The Communist Manifesto* (1844) was undoubtedly influenced by Carlyle’s very similar, if more elaborately rhetorical, account in *Chartism* (1839). For Carlyle’s influence on Engels, see Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1974), 103–04, 110–12.

4. Raymond Williams, "Forms of English Fiction in 1848," in *Writing in Society* (1977; London: Verso, 1985), 150–66; Williams, *Culture*, 99–119.
5. Williams, "Forms of English Fiction," 163.
6. Williams, "Forms of English Fiction," 163–64.
7. Williams, "Forms of English Fiction, 163. The seed of Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), as well as of Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, 1832–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), was Williams's chapter on the industrial novel in *Culture and Society*.
8. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 100.
9. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New York: Dover, 1968), 1: 1–2.
10. See Arnold, Chapter 3: "Barbarians, Philistines, Populace."
11. See Book 3, "The Modern Worker," in Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. Richard D. Altick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).
12. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 185, 179.
13. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 108, 123.
14. For a similar account of this phenomenon see John Kucich, *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 12–16.



## Class

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**D**ROR Wahrman compares it to a layer cake. Paul Fussell has said it resembles a bus: the structure remains the same, even as individual riders come and go. David Cannadine makes the point that, rather than do away with earlier systems of rank and inheritance, the tripartite distinctions so commonly invoked—upper, middle, and lower—reinforce them.<sup>1</sup> The school system in Victorian England was organized into three "grades," and the same structure (often tripartite) appears throughout social and economic life today: in education, in air and train travel, and in consumer culture. Rather than destroy the old