

concern about morality and virtue in U.S.

THE DE-MORALIZATION OF SOCIETY: FROM VICTORIAN VIRTUES TO MODERN VALUES

By Gertrude Himmelfarb

Knopf, \$24, 288 pages

REVIEWED BY WOODY WEST

To encounter the label "Victorian" in most political or literary contexts these days is to encounter a tone derisive or contemptuous.

In conventional imagery, the Victorians were imperialist and paternalistic, hierarchical and anti-egalitarian, sexually rigid and hypocritical, repressed and repressive, and a host of other qualities that are frowned on in this brave new postmodernist world.

In fact, the society of that era was remarkably humane, creative and disciplined. It is a period that speaks, or should speak, pointedly to Americans today, intrinsically as our culture shares the legacy of those dynamic decades.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, emeritus professor of history at the graduate school of the City University of New York, has written prolifically of the Victorian era and employs the Archimedean lever of historical analysis of the period to comment astutely on contemporary American culture in her new book.

"The De-Moralization of Society" is an apt title, both conveying a sense of despond about our institutions and prospects and diagnosing a part of that less-than-exuberant outlook as the result of a degradation of moral values — or "virtues" in more traditional usage. Indeed, symptomatic of the "de-moralization" is the very word "values," a usage with tenuous and feeble meanings compared with the quite precise denotations of the word "virtue."

Miss Himmelfarb emphasizes Thomas Carlyle on the "Condition of England" a century and a half ago. While his contemporaries were debating whether economic conditions had improved or the contrary, Carlyle argued that of greater moment was "the condition" and "disposition" of the English people — their beliefs and feelings, their sense of right and wrong, the attitudes and habits

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that would dispose them either to a "wholesome composure, frugality and prosperity" or to an "acrid unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking and gradual ruin."

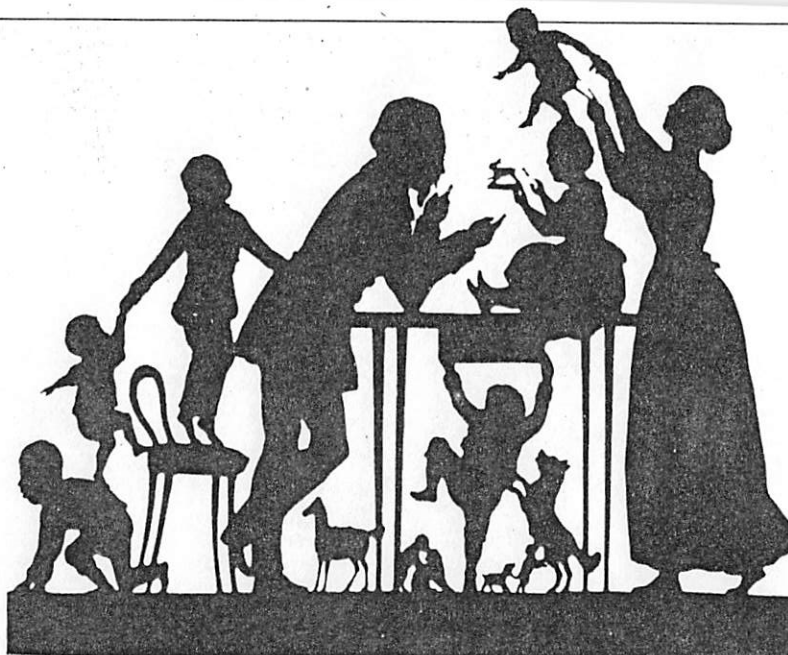
Of primary importance to Carlyle, in other words, were the intangibles that underwrite social order and, if you will, civic self-respect.

It is on "the condition" of the culture that we need to focus, Miss Himmelfarb writes, and she contends, "Current statistics are not only more troubling than those a century ago; they constitute a trend that bodes even worse for the future than for the present." Where the Victorians "had the satisfaction of witnessing a significant improvement in their condition, we are confronting a considerable deterioration in ours."

Looking at one critical category, illegitimacy, Miss Himmelfarb persuasively makes her case by comparing statistics then and now. The dramatic increase in illegitimate births in the United States and the United Kingdom in recent decades over those in the Victorian era contributes strongly to "the pathology of poverty": welfare dependency, crime, drugs, illiteracy, homelessness.

It is only in recent years that the drastic U.S. increase in out-of-wedlock births has become a matter of public concern, after being ignored or disingenuously rationalized for decades. Illegitimate births in this country have increased drastically, now accounting for more than a fifth of all births, "fourteen times the 1920 figure and eleven times that of 1960." Among blacks, illegitimacy had risen to 68 percent by 1991. England during this period was second only to the United States in births out of wedlock.

In contrast, in the United States



From the book jacket

and England during the 19th century, illegitimacy, allowing for modest fluctuations, was in the single-digit range, decreasing toward the end of the century. And this in two quite similar cultures that we frequently are now pleased to judge historically deficient in so many social indices.

"For a long time social critics and policy-makers have found it hard to face up to the realities of our moral condition, in spite of the statistical evidence," Miss Himmelfarb writes. She invokes Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's powerful thesis of "defining deviancy down" — that is, to accommodate intellectually and emotionally the indicators of disarray, we have dropped the threshold of how we define the aberrant and the appalling.

Well, why and so what?

For one thing, the tacit (and often not so tacit) assumption that moral progress ineluctably follows material progress permits us to evade the clear instances where it does

not follow, ineluctably or otherwise. In part, Miss Himmelfarb says, this is "a failure of moral nerve."

"It is this reluctance to speak the language of morality, far more than any specific values, that separates us from the Victorians." Moral principles and judgments, she writes, "were as much a part of social discourse as of private discourse, and as much a part of public policy as of personal life."

The prevailing notion — only now, perhaps, showing signs of erosion — that society is responsible for the spectrum of social problems and bears the burden of solving them makes it hard to inculcate the virtue of individual accountability. Add to that the rampant virus of relativism and you have the appalling front-page news of most days.

Miss Himmelfarb also contends that our contemporary "moral divide" is essentially one of class — that "the new class" mandarins of the media, the academy and government have in "a curious way"

legitimated the values of the underclass and illegitimated those of the working class who still are committed "to bourgeois values, the Puritan ethic, and other such benighted ideas."

This precis may make "The Demoralization of Society" seem another polemical indictment. The book, as any reader of Miss Himmelfarb's previous works would expect, presents an informative historical landscape of those Victorian years to focus a lens on contemporaries. It is nice to note that the book has been chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club's History Club and as an alternate selection for Reader's Subscription Book Club.

Miss Himmelfarb has hung out to dry those myths of the Victorian age that have casual currency. But more, she makes that period thoroughly eloquent for us today as we stumble about, and she does it with stimulating vigor.

Woody West is associate editor of *The Washington Times*.

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