

# The Masses Are De-Moralized

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 hypocritical, repressed and repressive, among 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—a circumstance that speaks, or should speak, pointedly to Americans. Indeed, in her new book, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (Knopf, 288 pp), Gertrude Himmelfarb employs the Archimedean lever of historical analysis to comment austutely on contemporary American culture.

It is "the condition" of society that demands attention, writes Himmelfarb, referring to Thomas Carlyle's *Condition of England*, written a century and a half ago. While his contemporaries debated economic conditions, Carlyle observed the "disposition" of the English—the beliefs, attitudes and habits that would dispose them either to a "wholesome composure, frugality and prosperity" or to an "acidic unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking and gradual ruin." Of primary importance to Carlyle, in other words, were the intangibles that underwrite social order and civic self-respect.

"Current statistics are not only more troubling than those a century ago," writes Himmelfarb. "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."

Himmelfarb makes her case persuasively by comparing statistics on illegitimacy then and now. In the United States and England during the 19th century, illegitimacy, allowing for modest fluctuations, was in the single-



digit range, decreasing toward the end of the century. Illegitimate births in this country have since increased drastically, now accounting for more than a fifth of all births, "fourteen times the 1920 figure and eleven times that of 1960." The dramatic increase in illegitimate births here and in the United Kingdom contributes strongly to "the pathology of poverty": welfare dependency, crime, drugs, illiteracy and homelessness. It is only recently, however, that these statistics have become a matter of public concern.

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

So what? Well, for one thing, the tacit (and often not so tacit) assumption that moral progress follows material progress permits us to evade the clear instances where it does not follow. In part, this is "a failure of moral nerve," Himmelfarb says. "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. 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."

Woody West is associate editor of *Insight*.

## Victoria Vive

When she died at 81 on Jan. 22, 1901, Queen Victoria's multitudinous family, Britain and its empire paid a sublime farewell. It was the 64th year of her reign.

There is among writers, readers and publishers an unending fascination with this lady and her age. The latest addition to the growing oeuvre: *Farewell in Splendor: The Passing of Queen Victoria and Her Age* (Dutton, 304 pp) by Jerrold M. Packard.

This book might be called a funerary history, concentrating as it does on the emotions and reactions, the astounding protocols and preparations of Victoria's death.

Packard is particularly good concerning the details and personalities

surrounding her passing at Osborne House and the remarkable arrangements of ritual with which the queen was buried. (He even includes a discussion of embalming techniques of the period.)

Mourning dress, for instance: For women of middle to high status, mourning dress for a sovereign "involved an extravagant, expensive, and total change in their appearance"—not limited to outerwear. Shiny materials, such as satins or velvets, were taboo. Twilled and ribbed weaving techniques were used to break up surfaces to eliminate any shine. Bombazine, the near-habitual dress of Victoria, was the most popular of fabrics—with black crepe draped over everything ambulatory and stationary.

Packard sketches the geopolitics of the new century and Victorian might and vulnerability in *Farewell in Splendor*, but Victoria herself is the book's essential focus.

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