The Politics of Popular Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century

In an age during which social media dominates much of our popular culture, its links with national and international politics are increasingly evident. If the Victorian period witnessed the invention of mass entertainment (Jackson, 2019), then we should assess the interaction between Victorian popular culture, and politics. We may also consider popular culture to be innately political in itself.

E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* provided the working classes with agency by demonstrating how they contributed to creating their own popular culture (Thompson, 1963). Victorian opposition to traditional forms of mass entertainment, including the Sabbatarian and Temperance movements, was born out of the Victorian cult of respectability, and enhanced by Evangelicalism (McWilliam, 2023). Peter Bailey has suggested that working-class respectability may be performative, sustaining Thompson's work on the agency of the working classes (Bailey, 1998).

Popular culture interpreted as 'essentially the history of leisure' (McWilliam, 2023) may include printed material, strongly visual in focus, including illustrations, posters, pamphlets, handbills, and children's literature. Examples of visual entertainment include magic lantern shows, panoramas, and early photography. The penny press and cheap literature were inherently political in that they were responsible for the spreading of literacy and working-class consciousness.

The emergence of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) saw public spaces becoming sites of both popular culture and politics, as points of meeting for the exchange of ideas. Brian Harrison has demonstrated the importance of sites of drink as accommodation, sites of trade and of the payment of wages, and as gathering places for organisations including friendly societies and trade unions (Harrison, 1971). Christina Parolin has demonstrated how one particular pub, the Crown and Anchor, eventually transcended its function as a tavern and assumed a political identity in its own right by its associations with the radical movement (Parolin, 2010). Other public spaces of Victorian popular culture which may be considered political include the music hall and theatres as sites of class mixing and satire, or the Crystal Palace, as the location of the Great Exhibition, a celebration of industrial, national, and imperial power.

We may also examine popular movements such as Chartism, or the Temperance movement, and their links to the control of leisure. William Lovett was an agitator for Sunday opening and rational recreation as a means to the enfranchisement, education, and respectability of the working classes. The Temperance movement's tea parties, its juvenile section, the Band of Hope, and railway day trips organised by Thomas Cook constituted improving alternatives to traditional working-class leisure activities, including violent sports such as cockfighting and bearbaiting, or fairs. If 'a nation's recreations were taken as a test of its people's character,' (Bailey, 1978) then popular culture and leisure activities became political arenas in which the battle of respectability was fought.

As the nineteenth century progressed, access to popular culture and amusements increased, particularly after the 1870s due to increased wages and time for leisure (Bailey, 1978). The Victorian period thus not only witnessed the emergence of and increased accessibility to leisure, in terms of both time and money, but was also a period of debate regarding how this should be spent.

This study day will therefore question how nineteenth-century popular culture engaged in politics and provided the working classes with agency. If popular culture should be considered as emanating from the people, then what were its implications for popular politics and the enfranchisement of the people? Another objective will be to question how popular culture was employed to political ends, by those desirous of various forms of social control. If middle-class reformers sought to render popular culture more respectable, then what was the impact on national identity and class relations? As such, Victorian popular culture will be considered as a site of political contention, with local, national, and international consequences.

This interdisciplinary study of the politics of popular culture will mobilise political, social, and cultural history, the history of ideas, as well as a diverse corpus of Victorian popular culture, including textual, visual, and musical examples. The contributions will build on the 2023 study day organised by IDEA, 'Protest! Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Ethics of Dissent,' by considering how Victorian popular culture empowered the people and provided them with opportunities and spaces via which to challenge the status quo. Additionally, the 2022 IDEA conference 'Power and Knowledge from the 18th Century to Today' explored the implications of the relations between power and knowledge; this study day will contribute by expanding on the emanation of political knowledge, and thus political agency, via popular culture, as well as attempts to control and restrict the political agency of the people.

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