THE VICTORIAN AGE: TRIUMPH OF THE LIBERAL BOURGEOISIE

I. Purpose and overview of the lecture

A. To move away, at least partly, from the political and intellectual focus of the previous lectures, and to flesh out some points already discussed

B. To explore further the social and cultural realms
   1. These are the areas where the "new history" has been most active
   2. Here "DWEM" history (history of Dead White European Males) is less of a presence
      a) Political history and intellectual history are almost unavoidably associated with the male world
   3. However, it should be said that matters like national unification, liberalism, socialism, Darwinism, slavery, and warfare, were hardly irrelevant to the lives of women
   4. Still, men tended to be the most visible players in those arenas
   5. In fact, men were still quite prominent in the social and cultural realms
      a) Nineteenth-century society was a patriarchal society—perhaps even more than previous centuries—and nineteenth-century culture (at least in the sense of high culture) was still predominantly a male culture
      b) But it is nonetheless easier to delineate female components of those realms than is the case with ideology and politics

C. To explore what "Victorian" and "liberal triumph" meant in concrete terms (but also their less concrete aspects)
   1. How can one best define "bourgeois" or "middle class" at this time?

D. To explore what "bourgeois temper" or middle-class character was like
   1. These terms are often used in vague, slippery, and changing way
2. They, too, have a history, just as do political terms, such as "socialist" or "communist"

E. To explore national varieties of the "liberal triumph"
   1. "Victorian" is a not entirely adequate term, since it derives from British norms
      a) The French, German, and Russian varieties were significantly different
      b) Moreover, we have come, especially in the past decade or so, to understand just how inappropriate it was to use Victoria’s name for attitudes that she did not really share (at least not in the sexual realm—and especially not in her youth)

II. Definition of bourgeois or middle class in the nineteenth century

A. In economic and social terms, McKay offers a simple, practical standard: "servant-employing" class (or classes)

B. In other words, one entered the middle class once one began to employ servants

C. "Servant-employing" also included the aristocracy, but in practical terms the definition still has much to recommend it—in part for what it implies
   1. The bourgeoisie or middle class, thus, owned enough property to hire others, or to put its members in an exploitative relationship to the poorer classes
   2. In the business world, too, this meant owning enough property to hire a significant number of employees
      a) Or, more generally, to own enough property (in real estate, stocks, etc.) that one had an income from "exploiting" others

D. All of this might be stated simply in terms of monetary income, or figures of absolute wealth
   1. The middle class had a certain income, between that of the poor and the very rich aristocrats
   2. But since nineteenth-century figures in pounds, francs, and marks do not mean much to us today, the more contextual definition of owning property and hiring servants is more useful

E. Another simple key for bourgeois status: The extent to which one did not do heavy manual labor and could be considered
“independent,” not under the authority of another person in the workplace

F. All of these definitions have certain problems, but they offer at least relative precision on the issue, and make clear both differences and similarities to the situation of the middle class in America today

III. The political dimensions of the liberal triumph in the 1850s and 1860s

A. We should first understand that this "triumph" was a process, not an "event", nor was it a single phenomenon in all countries—there was much variation

B. Liberals struggled for their political program from the early 19th century on
   1. They had various partial victories before the 1850s
      a) The Reform Bill of 1832, for example
   2. Even the revolution in France in 1830 was a kind of partial liberal victory

C. Part of the problem in speaking of a liberal victory, of course, is in the vagueness and many-sided qualities of the term "liberal"

D. Further clarification of those many sides is thus called for:
   1. In its broadest form, it refers to a belief in freedom, a "mentality" that believes that people solve their problems best in individual freedom
   2. Historians widely agree that the 1850s and 1860s saw the clearest prevalence of "liberalism," however defined
      a) But there was considerable variety within Europe
      b) And, of course, in many areas the liberal program of the revolutionaries of 1848 seemed to "fail"
      c) Still, the word is exaggerated: Even in "failing," as in Germany, liberal ideals and programs asserted themselves
      d) This is often termed "bourgeois hegemony"
   3. Even other classes become "bourgeois" in habits, tastes, clothing, life-style
      a) Thus, an aristocrat might be the actual minister, but he might also defend policies that can be broadly termed "bourgeois" (free trade, free speech, careers
open to talent, etc.)—Cavour is a good example

4. Belief in constitutional government, limits on the rights of the executive, some separation of powers, judicial review

5. Rule of law, due process, civil rights, sanctity of the individual

6. Protection of private property
   a) Sanctity of contracts

7. Rights of inheritance

8. Preservation of family
   a) Key inconsistency: This was a "privilege," one that worked contrary to the principle of the equality of opportunity on the individual level

9. *Laissez-faire* (pronounced "lessay fair") economy
   a) The repeal of the Corn Laws (1846), symbolized the end of "unfair" state, the protection for landowners in Britain
   b) Limited liability companies: This legal measure greatly encouraged risk-taking, business enterprise

10. Limited power of the state
    a) The state is rule-setting, not interventionist
    b) It should not, for example, intervene to help the poor with unemployment insurance or retirement funds
    c) It should not, similarly, set up tariff barriers or give other kinds of protections to privileged industries

11. The underlying ideal: The individual should be self-reliant, not expect that the state would care for him

12. Freedom of speech, assembly

13. Protection of minority rights against "tyranny of the majority"
    a) The right to express unpopular opinions should be protected by law
    b) Any control of opinion or minority rights to be done only through recognized procedures, or due process—not simply putting it to a vote of the people (*not* majority rule)
    c) It should be said, though, that 19th century liberals
clearly never dreamed of the extent of "liberty" of late 20th century

**IV. The main national varieties of liberal-bourgeois "triumph"**

A. Great Britain was of course the universally recognized standard

B. Its laws, constitution, parliament, free-market economy, liberty of press, etc. were all widely admired by liberals in other countries

C. Bismarck's Germany—a significant "exception"

1. Key concept in German history: the *Sonderweg*, or "special path"

2. A familiar generalization about 19th century German history: "Liberalism failed in Germany, due to Bismarck's influence" – he united Germany on conservative-Junker principles, while the liberal nationalists failed

3. This generalization remains an area of lively debate among scholars

4. Clearly, the Junkers (Prussian rural aristocrats) retained leading positions in the state bureaucracy and (especially) army

5. Similarly, the German constitution was not fully liberal, because of the power of the chancellor

   a) The German parliament, or Reichstag, did not have the power to dismiss him, as in the English liberal model

6. Yet, most of the fundamental concerns of the liberal bourgeoisie were satisfied in Bismarck's Reich

   a) Free-market economy, constitution, rule of law, freedom of speech, protection of property

7. The German middle class after 1871 was hardly a restive, deeply dissatisfied class

8. Thus, the charge that it was "Junkerized" or "de-liberalized" has been a bit exaggerated by some observers (though there is also some truth to it)

9. On the local level, middle-class representatives took over most of the state bureaucracies and functioned in a more "fully liberal" way in the *Länder* (states) and city councils

10. More subtly but still importantly, a pervasive "bourgeois mentality" is reflected in German culture—in dress,
manners, artistic tastes, and a range of attitudes to work, saving, family, etc.

11. The key “exceptional” areas, where liberal norms were violated:

   a) As noted, the constitution itself, which allowed the chancellor so much power in relation to the Reichstag

   b) Anti-Socialist Laws (1878-90), violating the right of association, freedom of speech, sanctity of parliamentary deputies

   c) The so-called Kulturkampf (“cultural struggle”), the discriminatory legislation against German Catholics, violating the liberal concept of religious toleration

      (a) (though in truth liberals everywhere were not so sure about tolerating the highly intolerant Catholic Church)

   d) The protection of Junker agricultural interests (violating the principle of free trade—much like the early 19th century issue of the Corn Laws in Great Britain)

D. France and Napoleon III

1. Napoleon's rule will be further explored in future lectures

2. It was seen by many as a dictatorship, and not without reason, especially in the years immediately following the revolution of 1848

3. Yet, even in this dictatorship, most of the bourgeois program was retained

   a) And the French bourgeoisie was not really or widely opposed to Napoleon's rule (in large part at first because he had, like his uncle, brought stability and repressed the extreme left)

4. This was a time (1850s and 1860s), of relatively rapid industrial growth in France

   a) Many of the liberal goals of modernization—rapid industrial growth, application of science, secularization—were respected and supported by Napoleon’s government

5. Moreover, he moved slowly toward a "liberal Empire" by the late 1860s—cut short by the Franco-Prussian War of
1870-1.

E. Alexander II of Russia (1855-81)

1. Here is where the term "liberal" gets stretched almost beyond reason

2. Alexander, as an autocratic tsar, was certainly no liberal in the western sense

3. Yet, even he recognized, however hesitantly, the need to modernize, to copy many of the "liberal" states of the West—or be overrun by them eventually

a) His "liberal" (or, really a better term, "modernizing") reforms will the subject of another lecture

b) But the essential point is that even in Russia, the most reactionary state in Europe, powerful pressures were felt in this period to introduce "liberal" reforms

V. The Bourgeois Temper: a Description

A. This is one of the most slippery areas, but it is also of undeniably great importance and interest

B. How various observers have evaluated the Victorian temper differs significantly, depending on the political perspective of that observer

C. The left, whether politically or aesthetically, has been and generally remains highly critical

1. Such is the case above all with the feminist left

D. The right, especially certain 20th century conservatives (and neo-conservatives), look back with increasing nostalgia and admiration

E. Key traits of the bourgeois temper: Self-discipline, order, thrift, hard work, deferred and planned "pleasures," suspicion of sensuality, a moralizing tone

1. "Life is a business", one that needs to be ordered as one orders a business, in rational, controlled ways

2. Compare this to the ideal type of old aristocrat: "Life is leisure" or play, where one seeks out amusement, sensual gratification, adventure and excitement

a) The aristocrat spends lavishly, without a "bourgeois" concern for frugality, planned expenditure, avoidance of undue risk
3. A further comparison of ideal types is revealing: For the laboring, lower classes life is struggle to survive
   a) One takes one's pleasures when one can
   b) A greater sense of immediacy, living in the present, less moralizing, less planning and rational control, less individualism and independence

F. Bourgeois cultural tastes
1. Again, this is an area of controversy, with slippery, elusive, or overlapping categories
2. Still, there do seem to have been certain kinds of cultural expressions and tastes that we may usefully and not too vaguely term "bourgeois"
3. In this period there was a new, larger audience for "art," as there was for "science"
   a) It is a new, in some sense "popular" audience but nothing like the later "mass" audience of the twentieth century
4. Opera is often seen as a “typical” bourgeois art form, as is symphony music (and the audiences of those two art forms were overwhelmingly bourgeois)
5. Public lectures, museums, newspapers were similarly attuned to the bourgeoisie, and it was the bourgeoisie that attended or bought them—particularly with the idea of being "uplifted"
6. Attention to the home, to a particular variety of furnishings

VI. The Bourgeois Temper: difficulties and critiques

A. It has been argued that the Victorian bourgeois standard was unrealistic for most human beings, giving rise to important contradictions and hypocrisies
   1. The hypocrisies, in particular, have been seen as a particularly striking quality of the bourgeois temper

B. There was a pronounced tendency to have quite separate public and private faces
   1. In a related way, one for men another for women (“separate spheres”), one for the middle class and another for the lower classes

C. For the critics of the Victorians, certainly, hypocrisy appears as
its main defect

D. The arena of hypocrisy that has impressed many observers, especially modern feminists) as most important was that of the family and the relation of man and wife in it

1. Its central figure: the *paterfamilias*
   a) All owed him deference (intriguingly, "pater" became used in many families instead of "daddy" or even "father")
   b) He was a rather distant figure to his children, having almost nothing to do with raising them
   c) Indeed, it has been suggested by some that the peculiarities of the Victorian family all finally revolved around his peculiar needs

1) This is very large subject, ranging from his sexuality to his business activities

E. The "Victorian Compromise"

1. A many-faceted and provocative term
2. As far as family life was concerned, it had to do with a peculiar notion of "compromise"
   a) A man, facing the social-darwinistic world of business, absolutely needed this tranquil "haven"—a "haven in a heartless world"

F. The position of the Victorian woman

1. The woman was the one who paid the largest price, according to this theory
   a) Her needs and aspirations were all subordinated to the needs of the paterfamilias
   b) Especially female sexuality was feared and repressed, since it was seen as threatening to the security of the family—and that was to be protected above all
   c) Indeed, the existence of female sexual needs was often denied, or ignored
   d) There was, however, a class dimension to this: Fear and repression of sexuality was more “bourgeois” than aristocratic or working-class
   e) And many scholars, Peter Gay, for example, have recently been casting doubt upon the too easy
generalizations of earlier historians

2. Still, there was obviously some important differences in public expressions, such things as what was considered proper to be talked about openly—Victorian prudishness was a reality

a) Given what goes on in t.v. talk shows today, that Victorian reticence does indeed take on a certain allure

b) On that sour note, I will leave you to think about the nature of progress