



Mathew Arnold's Class Stratification and the Effects of Industrialization

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Abstract

This paper examines Matthew Arnold's influential analysis of Victorian English society as presented in his work "Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism." Through careful analysis of Arnold's tripartite division of society into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace, this study explores how these classifications reflected and responded to the sweeping changes brought by industrialization. The study demonstrates how Arnold's cultural criticism provides a unique lens for understanding the complex interplay between social class, cultural values, and industrial progress in 19th century England. By examining Arnold's perspective on personal subjectivity and inter-class relationships, this paper reveals the lasting relevance of his cultural criticism to contemporary discussions of social change and cultural development. The study concludes that Arnold's framework, while rooted in Victorian sensibilities, offers valuable insights into the ongoing challenges of maintaining cultural cohesion in rapidly changing societies.

Keywords: Culture and Anarchy, Victorian England, Social Classes, Industrialization

1.0 Introduction

In "Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism," Matthew Arnold provides an analysis of English society, dividing it into three distinct classes: Barbarians, Philistines and Populace. This work was published in 1869, emerging during a period of unprecedented social and economic transformation in Victorian England. The rapid pace of industrialization, coupled with growing political consciousness among the working classes, created new tensions and challenges in the social fabric of 19th century England. Arnold's analysis not only captures these societal shifts but also offers a profound critique of the cultural implications of these changes.

Arnold's tripartite division of society reflects his deep concern about the direction of English culture during this turbulent period. His framework goes beyond simple economic categorization to examine the cultural values, behaviors, and aspirations of each social stratum. This sophisticated analysis provides valuable

insights into both the immediate context of Victorian society and the broader implications of industrialization on human consciousness and social relationships. Through his careful examination of these classes, Arnold illuminates the complex interplay between cultural inheritance, economic progress, and social stability.

This paper explores Arnold's class stratification and offers insights into his perspective on the effects of modern industrialization on personal subjectivity and social dynamics. It examines how his cultural criticism provides a unique lens for understanding the challenges faced by societies undergoing rapid technological and social change. By analyzing Arnold's views on culture, education, and social order, we can better appreciate both the historical significance of his work and its continuing relevance to contemporary discussions about class, culture, and social progress.

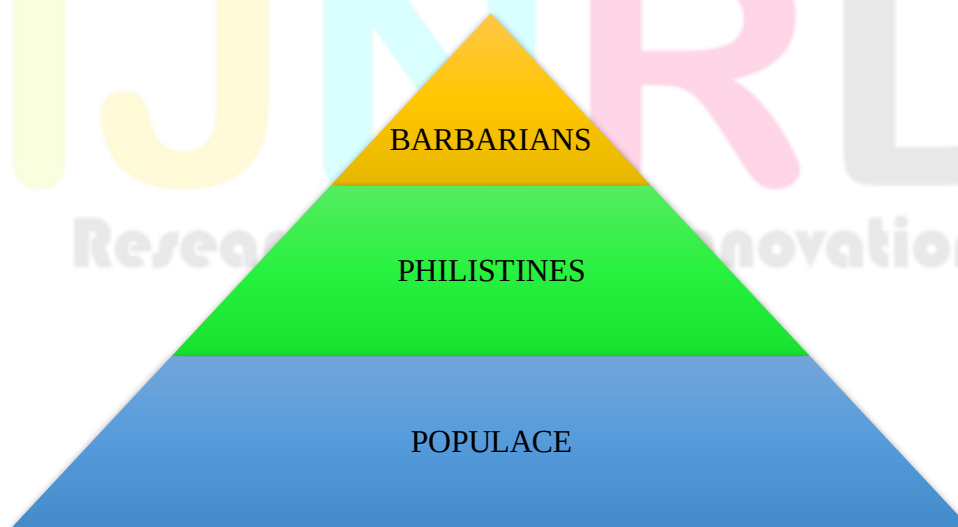
1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To analyze Matthew Arnold's tripartite division of Victorian society and examine how these classifications reflect the social realities of 19th century England.
- ii. To investigate the relationship between industrialization and cultural transformation as articulated in Arnold's social criticism.
- iii. To evaluate Arnold's perspective on how industrial progress affected personal identity and consciousness across different social classes.
- iv. To assess the relevance of Arnold's cultural criticism to contemporary discussions of social change, class dynamics, and cultural development in rapidly evolving societies.

1.2 Arnold's Class Stratification

Arnold divided English society into three main classes, each with its own unique characteristics and relationship to culture. His observations were sharp and often critical, as he tried to understand how each class either contributed to or hindered cultural development in Victorian England.



Arnold's stratification of the English society

(i) Barbarians

Arnold was particularly punitive in his criticism of this group, even more so than his criticism of the working class. These were the aristocrats - the nobles, lords and women of English society. He called them “Barbarians” not because they were uncivilized, but because they reminded him of the noble barbarians of ancient times, who valued physical prowess, outward appearance, and material splendor.

Arnold believed these aristocrats had failed in their duty to society. Despite their excellent manners, good education, and refined tastes, they had become too focused on external appearances and physical activities rather than developing their minds and spirits. He saw them as having abandoned their responsibility to be cultural leaders. In his view, they had traded their cultural heritage for mere pleasure and entertainment, leading to a decline in their moral and intellectual influence over society.

(ii) Philistines

The middle class earned the title “Philistines” from Arnold, a term he borrowed from German universities where it was used to describe people who were not part of academic life. These were the businessmen, merchants, and industrialists who had gained wealth through commerce and industry.

Arnold was particularly concerned by this group’s attitudes and values. He saw them as being obsessed with making money and achieving practical success, but having little interest in higher cultural pursuits. They were hardworking and morally upright, but in Arnold’s view, they were also narrow-minded and hostile to new ideas. Their focus on business and religious nonconformity made them, in Arnold’s eyes, enemies of true culture. He criticized their tendency to measure everything by its practical usefulness or its ability to generate profit.

(iii) Populace

The working class, whom Arnold called the “Populace,” represented the majority of England’s population. These were the factory workers, miners, agricultural laborers, and other manual workers who had emerged as a powerful social force during the Industrial Revolution.

Arnold’s view of the working class was complex. While he sympathized with their difficult living conditions, he was deeply concerned about their growing political power. He saw them as being driven by raw energy and basic impulses rather than reason and culture. Arnold worried that without proper cultural education, the working class might use their increasing political power in destructive ways. He believed they needed guidance and cultural enlightenment to become constructive members of society.

Arnold’s division of society was more than just a simple description of social classes. It was his way of diagnosing what he saw as England’s cultural problems. He believed that each class had its own particular weaknesses that prevented it from achieving true culture:

- i. The Barbarians were too focused on external show and physical excellence.
- ii. The Philistines were too focused on making money and practical success.
- iii. The Populace were too focused on immediate gratification and lacked cultural refinement.

His solution was not to abolish these classes but to help each group overcome its limitations through cultural education. He believed that true culture could help:

- i. Remind the Barbarians of their responsibilities as social leaders.
- ii. Broaden the Philistines' narrow focus on practical success.
- iii. Guide the Populace toward more refined and reasonable behavior.

1.3 Arnold's View of Functions of Culture

According to Arnold, culture serves two primary functions:

- i. To carefully guide the aristocracy and middle class away from degeneration and back to culture.
- ii. To bring a much-needed principle of authority to the working class, counteracting what Arnold perceived as their anarchic tendencies. Culture, in his view, must be authoritative enough to control the working class.

1.4 Reasons for Societal Decline According to Arnold

Arnold identified several factors contributing to what he saw as society's cultural decline:

i. Rapid Industrialization

Arnold viewed the unprecedented pace of industrialization in mid-nineteenth century England as a primary catalyst for societal unrest and cultural deterioration. The transformation from an agrarian to an industrial economy created massive social dislocation as populations shifted from rural communities to urban centres. These rapid changes outpaced society's ability to develop appropriate cultural and institutional responses. Arnold observed how industrialization prioritized mechanical efficiency and material production over human development and cultural refinement. The factory system, with its emphasis on standardization and specialization, threatened individuality and creativity - qualities Arnold considered essential to genuine culture. Moreover, the pollution, overcrowding, and harsh working conditions in industrial cities created an environment hostile to the "sweetness and light" that Arnold saw as the hallmarks of true culture. In his analysis, industrialization fostered a utilitarian mindset that valued immediate practical results over long-term cultural development, leading to what he termed a "mechanical" rather than "organic" approach to social progress.

ii. Empowerment of the Working Classes

The growing political and economic power of the working-class Arnold's - "Populace" - was a source of profound concern for him. While he acknowledged the legitimate grievances of workers and recognized the injustices they faced, he feared that their political empowerment without corresponding cultural education would lead to social instability. The Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, which expanded voting rights, represented for Arnold the dangerous rise of democratic impulses uninformed by cultural wisdom. He viewed the working class as driven primarily by raw energy and basic impulses rather than reason and refined taste. Their increasing ability to influence national policy through political organization, labour movements, and expanded suffrage

created what Arnold saw as a risk of “doing as one likes” without adequate regard for higher cultural values. Arnold did not oppose democracy in principle but believed that without cultural guidance, working-class empowerment would lead to a fragmented society where immediate desires trumped more profound considerations of intellectual and spiritual development. This tension between democratic rights and cultural authority remains central to Arnold’s social criticism.

iii. Debasement of the Aristocracy

Arnold’s critique of the aristocracy - his “Barbarians” - was particularly pointed. He saw the traditional ruling class as having abandoned its historic responsibility to provide cultural and moral leadership to society. Instead of embodying the best aspects of English culture and passing them on to other classes, the aristocracy had, in Arnold’s view, degenerated into a group primarily concerned with external appearances, physical prowess, and material splendor. Their education, while privileged, had become increasingly focused on sports, social graces, and maintaining class distinctions rather than developing intellectual depth and moral purpose. Arnold lamented how the aristocracy had exchanged their cultural heritage for mere pleasure and entertainment, leading to a vacuum in cultural leadership. He saw their preoccupation with hunting, social events, and maintaining country estates as symptoms of a class that had lost sight of its higher purpose. This debasement was particularly problematic because, in Arnold’s view, society needed cultural exemplars, and the traditional sources of such exemplary behavior had become corrupted by superficiality and self-indulgence.

iv. Rise of the Uncultured Middle Class

The ascendancy of the middle class - Arnold’s “Philistines” - represented another dimension of cultural decline in his analysis. These newly wealthy industrialists, merchants, and professionals had gained economic power through commercial success but lacked, in Arnold’s estimation, the cultural sophistication necessary for wise social leadership. He criticized their narrow focus on business, practical skills, and religious nonconformity, seeing in their values a hostility to intellectual breadth and aesthetic refinement. The middle class, with their celebration of self-help, hard work, and commercial success, embodied for Arnold a utilitarian approach to life that measured everything by its practical usefulness or ability to generate profit. Their growing influence on national policy and cultural institutions threatened to transform England into what Arnold feared would be a nation of shopkeepers rather than cultural leaders. The nouveau riche, in particular, with their ostentatious displays of wealth without corresponding cultural depth, exemplified for Arnold the dangers of prosperity divorced from cultural education. Their emphasis on religious nonconformity also concerned Arnold, as he saw in it a tendency toward rigid moral certainty without intellectual openness.

v. Failing Public Education System

Arnold, who served as an inspector of schools for over thirty years, had firsthand knowledge of England’s educational deficiencies. He viewed the education system as fundamentally inadequate for developing the kind of cultural awareness and intellectual breadth necessary for a healthy society. The schools for the working class offered merely basic literacy and vocational skills without introducing students to the broader cultural heritage

that Arnold believed essential for full human development. Middle-class education, meanwhile, focused too narrowly on commercial and professional preparation, neglecting the humanistic subjects that Arnold considered vital for cultural growth. Even elite education at public schools and universities had, in his view, become too specialized and tradition-bound, failing to adapt to the needs of a changing society while also neglecting their responsibility to preserve and transmit cultural wisdom. Arnold advocated for a more comprehensive and culturally rich educational system that would provide all classes with access to “the best that has been thought and said in the world.” Without such an educational foundation, he believed society would continue to fragment into isolated groups pursuing narrow interests without a shared cultural vision.

Arnold posited that adherence to his notion of culture meant realizing that we are ‘cultured’ because we are bound by certain norms. Without these norms, he believed society would lose its coherence and purpose. True culture, for Arnold, represented not merely aesthetic refinement but a harmonious development of all human capacities in service of a unified social vision - something he saw as increasingly threatened by the fragmentation caused by industrialization and class division.

1.5 Effects of Industrialization on Personal Subjectivity and Class Relationships

Arnold’s work provides valuable insights into how industrialization affected personal subjectivity and relationships among different social classes:

i. Class Anxiety: The rapid social changes brought about by industrialization created profound anxiety among the traditional upper classes about their place in society. As industrial wealth began to rival and sometimes surpass aristocratic holdings, the Barbarians faced an existential crisis of identity and purpose, forcing them to reconsider their historical role as cultural and political leaders in a rapidly changing landscape.

ii. Middle Class Aspirations: Arnold’s critique of the Philistines reflects the tensions created by a newly wealthy middle class aspiring to cultural status. These industrialists and merchants had acquired economic power but lacked the cultural refinement traditionally associated with the upper classes, creating a complex dynamic where material success and cultural capital competed for social legitimacy and recognition.

iii. Working Class Empowerment: The rise of working-class movements and their increasing political power challenged traditional class structures, leading to what Arnold saw as potential anarchy. Factory conditions, urbanization, and new forms of collective organization fundamentally altered working-class consciousness, creating a more unified and politically aware Populace whose demands for rights and representation threatened established power structures.

iv. Cultural Fragmentation: Industrialization led to a fragmentation of cultural values, with different classes developing distinct cultural norms and aspirations. The shared cultural touchstones that had previously united society across class lines began to dissolve as each group developed its own literature, entertainment, political viewpoints, and social institutions, further exacerbating tensions between Arnold’s three classes.

v. Education and Culture: Arnold's emphasis on education as a means of cultural refinement reflects the changing role of education in an industrialized society. As technical knowledge became increasingly valuable in the industrial economy, debates intensified about what kind of education should be offered to each class, with Arnold advocating for a humanistic approach that would cultivate "sweetness and light" rather than merely practical skills.

vi. Economic Determinism: Arnold's analysis suggests a growing awareness of how economic factors (industrialization) shape cultural and social dynamics. He recognized that the material conditions of production were fundamentally altering human relationships, values, and aspirations across all classes, challenging the traditional view that culture developed independently from economic structures.

vii. Nostalgia for Pre-Industrial Order: Arnold's critique often seems tinged with nostalgia for a pre-industrial social order, reflecting a broader societal ambivalence about rapid change. His idealization of culture as a stabilizing force reveals anxiety about the dissolution of traditional hierarchies and social bonds, suggesting a desire to preserve certain aspects of pre-industrial society even while acknowledging the inevitability of progress.

1.6 Conclusion

Matthew Arnold's stratification of English society and his analysis of the effects of industrialization offer valuable insights into the social dynamics of 19th century England. His work continues to influence discussions on the relationship between culture, class, and social progress. While his views may seem dated or elitist to modern readers, they provide an important historical perspective on how intellectuals grappled with the massive social changes brought about by industrialization. Arnold's emphasis on culture as a unifying and civilizing force remains relevant in contemporary debates about education, social cohesion, and cultural policy.

Key Quotes from Arnold's "Culture and Anarchy"

- i. "Our society distributes itself into Barbarians, Philistines and Populace."
- ii. "The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties."
- iii. "Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light."

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