1848-1914: Can You Name that Age?

Part A. For homework, read the following excerpts from characterizations of the period. Using these readings and your knowledge of the period, answer the questions at the end.

With the extension of the nation-state system Europe was politically more divided than ever. Its unity lay in the sharing by all Europeans of a similar way of life and outlook, which existed also in such "European" countries as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Europe and its offshoots constituted the "civilized world." Other regions—Africa, China, India, the up-country of Peru—were said to be "backward." (They are today more politely referred to as "underdeveloped.".) Europeans were extremely conscious and inordinately proud of their civilization in the half century before 1914. They believed it to be the well-deserved outcome of centuries of progress. Feeling themselves to be the most advanced branch of mankind in the important areas of human endeavor, they assumed that all peoples should respect the same social ideals—that so far as they were unwilling or unable to adopt them they were backward, and that so far as they did adopt them they became civilized in their turn.

These ideals of civilization were in part materialistic. If Europeans considered their civilization to be better in 1900 than in 1800, or better in 1900 than the ways of non-Europeans at the same time, it was because they had a higher standard of living, ate and dressed more adequately, slept in softer beds, and had more satisfactory sanitary facilities. It was because they possessed ocean liners, railroads, and street cars, and after about 1880 telephones and electric lights. But the ideal of civilization was by no means exclusively materialistic. Knowledge as such, correct or truthful knowledge, was held to be a civilized attainment—scientific knowledge of nature, in place of superstition or demonology; geographical knowledge, by which civilized people were aware of the earth as a whole with its general contours and diverse inhabitants. The ideal was also profoundly moral, derived from Christianity, but now secularized and detached from religion.¹

In the years under consideration the machinery of democratic self-government was being established and extended in western Europe and even in central and southern Europe. Political life was increasingly marked by movements toward constitutional government, representative assemblies, responsible ministries, the guarantee of individual liberties, and, most notably in this period, the democratic extension of the vote to the working class—the adoption of universal manhood suffrage, which in turn meant the creation of mass political parties. In response to a variety of pressures governments also found themselves more and more assuming responsibility for the social and economic problems created by industrialism. The welfare state in its modern form was taking shape.²

This volume, as it is, I could hardly have written before now. Born and prepared for college in the age which it attempts to recall, I saw those last three decades of the nineteenth century then—and for almost thirty years afterwards—as a

²Ibid., 577.

Some of the most significant changes in the quality of Western life in the nineteenth century resulted from the process of urbanization, that is, the shift of the population from the countryside to the city. As a consequence of this shift, the city—traditionally an enclave in a rural sea—became for many Western countries the normal place of habitation and for the whole modern world the main source of cultural values.

The social group identified with urban life is known as the middle class (in French, bourgeoisie). This term is not easy to define, because it is so often loosely used. For our purpose we shall define the middle class as consisting of those who derived their income from non-agrarian property, or professional skills and services and distinguish it from the landed aristocracy and the peasantry on the one hand and from manual labor on the other.

The middle class can be subdivided further into an upper and a lower part. The upper bourgeoisie consisted of industrial entrepreneurs, bankers and wealthy investors, big merchants, and representatives of the free professions.

The lower-middle class or petty bourgeoisie embraced a large and amorphous body of persons who furnished the aristocracy and upper-middle class with goods and services. It included shopkeepers, artisans, and domestic servants. Wedged between the prestigious upper middle class and the mass of manual laborers, the petty bourgeoisie was habitually insecure: eager to climb up the social ladder, dreading proletarianization, it was despised alike by the bourgeoisie proper, whom it wished to emulate, and by the manual workers, from whom it wished to separate itself.

We know less about the culture of the lower-middle class than of the upper, because the upper-middle class controlled the institutions of opinion and taste: the influential journals and newspapers, the theater, the art salons, the universities. This fact tends to distort our view of the nineteenth century. We think of it as an age of earnestness, refinement, and gentility, because such were the qualities characterizing the elite. They by no means held true of the age as a whole if we take as our criterion the outlook of the majority. Underneath the surface or what passes for nineteenth-century culture one can clearly discern the seeds of the mass culture of our own time.

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Compulsory primary schooling gave Europe a large body of citizens who were literate without being educated. They could read and write, but they had not been exposed to the humanizing influence of the liberal arts and had no taste for serious novels or informative newspapers and reviews. They preferred a simple and exciting literature that would enable them to escape their humdrum existence. This demand was met by a new literary industry designed specifically to cater to the large, semi-educated petty-bourgeois public of skilled workers, shopkeepers, clerks, and domestic servants.5

The 1850s mark in England a watershed in the history of mass culture. The increase of prosperity, as well as the spread of scientific views, reduced the interest in political and religious literature and created an insatiable demand for cheap escapist works.

The literature devoured by the mass reader avoided the moral and social issues preoccupying the middle class. Being frankly escapist, it either skirted real human problems or settled them by means of facile solutions. In the end, love and decency conquered all. The heroes and heroines were generally of humble origin, so that the reader could identify with them.

The narrative often introduced characters from the upper classes, but generally class lines were observed. The style inclined toward the turgid and rhetorical, the characters speaking in theatrical sentences that unconsciously parodied the language of the educated.

Among the diversions available to the masses, mention must be made of competitive sports. Traditionally an amusement of the rich, "games" became "sport" with the introduction of paid public contests. Soccer became a spectator sport in the 1870s; boxing, baseball, and tennis followed suit, and soon virtually all physical contests were commercialized.

Mass culture was not regarded in the nineteenth century as worthy of much attention, let alone respect. But with the steady improvement of the living standards of the Western population, the influence of this culture grew. In the twentieth century the lower-middle class became the most dynamic element in Western society, and its culture gradually superseded that of the bourgeoisie proper.6

1. What forces transformed European society in this period?

2. What class opposed this transformation? How did they attempt to use the transformation to their own advantage?

3. In what specific ways did the post-1848 European world differ from the preceding age?

5 Ibid., 485.
6 Ibid., 487.
4. What pre-1848 movements contributed to this transformation of European society?

5. What specific persons of the pre-1848 period had an impact on this transformation?

6. Specify one painting and one literary masterpiece that reflects this transformation.