

19th century  
industrial capitalism  
and the youth crisis of  
new york city.  
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## 19th Century Industrial Capitalism and the Youth Crisis of New York City.

With the transformation of American society from a commonwealth model to a capitalistic one, young American men left their families and pursued their individual interests. Quickly, American society realized that the new system had many defects. The process of fixing those defects did not pass without creating victims. For example- Industrial Capitalism created a corrupt youth. Inexperienced young men found themselves without family guidance and under the unfamiliar cultural and social pressures of the new life.

Society leaders thought that prescriptive literature and lectures would be enough to guide the youth to the virtuous world. In reality, youth required more than that. Young men required supervision and laws to correct and rectify the corrupt ones. The rise of industrial capitalism altered the social boundaries, and ultimately the cultural possibilities of young men. Before the transformation, the location of work was at home and young apprentices lived with their employers, who are most accurately described as masters in a familial-type relationship.

With the Industrial Revolution, masters were able to move their families to the new residential neighborhoods of the city, miles away from the industrial districts. At the same time, thousands of young men moved from New England to New York City, seeking their fortunes. These young men rented rooms in boarding houses. These houses had multiple bedrooms with two or three young men in each room. It was impossible for anyone to watch over these young men in this crowded environment. Lack of adult supervisions and social institutions, loosened the good behavior and values of young men.

According to Patricia Cline Cohen in *The Murder Of Helen Jewett*, “ the new living arrangements allowed for masculine youth culture to form virtually on its own. ” (Cohen, 11) When on their own at night, “ unsupervised young men were ready to take in the amusements of the metropolis to the extent permitted by their pocket-books. ” (Cohen, 11) They lived on their own and socialized with other young men who lacked self-discipline. After work, they went home to eat and later congregated at bars and brothels. The unfamiliar living conditions transformed the personalities of young men and reshaped it into a bold male form of culture.

These settings allowed them to explore the limits of leisure-like activities. The new industrial and economic system did not only alter social relationships but also shift the moral education. As the self-seeking individualistic model of economy grew, irreligious families neglected the moral training of youth. This neglect led to a serious fracturing of the virtuous community. Young men confronted a highly visible traffic of prostitution as prostitutes increased in both number and visibility. “ Innocent young men could easily be led astray by bad women. (Cohen, 231) Within a short period of time, places of evil, like brothels and theatres, replaced religious homes, and the lust of lower ranking women replaced the virtue of these men’s mothers and sisters. Brothels were central to the forming, nurturing, widening, and deepening the male culture. The young men socialized in the parlor of the brothels because most young men could not afford the expense of frequent visits to the upstairs rooms of prostitutes. Most men spent their time playing cards, gambling, listening to music, and sharing the stories of their sexual adventures.

They shared and recommended prostitutes to each other, were curious about each other's performance, and showed no signs of jealousy, illustrating that for these young men, "heterosexuality had a homosocial dimension." (Cohen, 146) Their circle of male camaraderie and heterosexual partners facilitated and enhanced their sexual experience. The men even made friendships through prostitutes, and after which they met each other to socialize. Society's double standard and the male view of the functions and duties of female encouraged the clerks to exploit the brothels life.

Majority of the 19th century society never questioned male sexual interests. Clerks were seen as lost, innocent individuals who broke down under the pressure of the temptations offered by doomed prostitutes. On the other hand, prostitutes had much less social status than clerks. Many people believed that prostitutes were born bad and "considered female sexual virtue to be irrecoverable once breached." (Cohen, 54) Therefore, most people felt no responsibility for the descent of corrupted women from virtue. Therefore, prostitutes were blamed for the corruption of the clerks.

City merchants contributed to the rise of a male culture based on prostitution. In the 19th century capitalism, some merchants started to adapt new ways to attract new clients and secure their established customers.

Merchants assigned clerks to frequent the theatres and brothels during the process of "drumming of the out-of-town buyers." (Cohen, 76) "Supplying or recommending sexual entertainment enhanced male sociability and helped to cement business relationships between strangers." (Cohen, 76)

The duties of the clerks included showing visitors a good time in the hopes of inducing visitors to purchase largely from the clerks' employers.

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Great capitalism integrated brothels into the sporting male culture of the day. Brothels also bordered the civic and cultural center of New York City. Entertainment gardens, museums, hotels, theatres, and concert halls were all in walking distance. All these places became centers of a masculine youth culture entirely new to the clerks and the city. Many clerks found themselves living double lives. During the day they were self-seeking individuals whose success in an expanding economy depended on thrift and hard work. At night these men found immediate relief in alcohol, lust, and masculine culture.

Clerks hid their activities at the brothels and theatres from their parents and employers. They were very careful to protect their reputations and maintain a separation between their two lives, because damage to their reputation could cost them their jobs and cause terrible shame to their parents. These men protected their reputations by adopting interchangeable identities and creating second characters. For example- Richard Robinson, the suspect in Helen Jewett murder, went by the name Frank Rivers during his visits to brothels.

Clerks maximized their earnings with little or no regard for the moral implications of their moneymaking methods. Established men and professionals could afford “ the \$5 fee that prostitutes charged for their sexual services. ” (Cohen. 112) Young clerks were among the men who frequently visited the upstairs rooms. A young clerk might earn “ at most \$4 per week (an entry-level job). ” (Cohen, 111) Spending \$5 dollars each time was definitely a stretch. The accumulating cost of the frequent visits to prostitutes might have turned some of the clerks into “ consummate  
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scoundrels. (Cohen, 318) it is shocking that no one knew or questioned the source of funding for their immoral indulgence. It seemed that the corruption of these rogues of New York exploded out of control during this period. Not only prostitutes but also clerks benefited from their relationships. First, the weekly steady visits of clerks to the upstairs rooms secured a consistent income for the prostitutes in an unstable line of work. Second, prostitutes tried to feel better about their profession by offering clerks emotional connections. Also, these connections gave prostitutes more leverage in the relationship.

On the other hand, “ clerks accepted the unconventional sex life of the prostitutes to satisfy their immense need for friendship, love, and sex, all things they valued and enjoyed. ” (Cohen, 247) In addition, clerks sought the emotional ties with a prostitute to reduce their fee per time. Clerks also, “ used prostitutes as a go-between for their own purposes,” (Cohen, 247) or referred them to other men. The new economic system divided the male culture into different classes. In reality, only a small segment of young men population enjoyed the flirtatious life of the brothels.

With capitalism, the gap between classes increased. Many young men could not afford the expenditure of the social life of brothels. With nothing else to occupy their time, youths sometimes turn to mischief to entertain themselves. They formed or joined neighborhood gangs. Poor young men became bold looters in the evening, singing obscene songs, using profane language, and attacking women. In other words, young men used degradation and humiliation to women to show their masculinity. The new

economic system did not only alter the class relationships but also the gender relationships.

The industrial revolution changed the role of women in the society, and after which active female workers started to demand workplace equality between men and women. Whenever and wherever men met women, they had to negotiate their manhood, sometimes in positive and sometimes in negative ways. For example- gangs of young men attacked prostitutes to remind them of the absolute power that men had over women and to restore the gender hierarchy. Prostitutes were good targets for the class malice of these poor young men because the prostitutes served the unreachable upper rich class.

The spreading gangs of young men caused the rise of a professional police force. In the past, the cohesion of the community, specifically the power of older generations over young men, was enough to enforce customary restraints on young men. But the emergence of the big cities, the falling out of the familial relations led to the increase of class animosity and harassment of women. Gangs of young men understood that the traditional guardians of social morality and order, such as the clergy and police, would neither attack nor defend them. The city had no professional police force, but a small number of men had full-time employment as police and watch officers. " (Cohen, 9) It was impossible for an unprofessional police force to control the masses of rowdy young men. Harassment of prostitutes was permissible to men wanting to tease or bully prostitutes. Society began to understand the need for some authority to restrain these young men.

Society directors realized that prescriptive literature was not enough to

guide the youth to the virtuous world. In small towns, churches provided intellectual and moral training for the youth.

In the beginning, to fill the void of the churches, moral male reformers published advice books to help these young men living away from home in New York City. These books exposed the sexual dangers of the big cities. Moral male reformers also appealed to young men by organizing open meetings, which were led by young men like them. During these meetings, they discussed prostitution and vice, “ entering into details of the most revolting description and filling the minds of young and old with ideas that they had never before entertained, and associations of the very existence of which they were previously and happily ignorant. (Cohen, 316) reformers started to provide sexual education to young men to fulfill their sexual curiosity. Male reformers also talked to young men about the sins of prostitution to depress their evil thoughts, and control their sexual desires. Moral female reformers also realized that something ought to be done to check the increasing licentiousness of the city. In the early 1830s, women ceded the initiative to their husbands and turned their faces away from the increasing abuse of females by young men. But soon after, these women realized that ” their men lacked the courage to take on sexual sin. (Cohen, 312) Female reform groups began offering prescriptive books to encourage sexual abstinence, and educate respectable women about the importance of virtuous moral practices and the danger of accepting libertines into their families. They opened employment agencies for women in need. They also embarrassed the lustful men by publishing their names in newspapers and pamphlets. The individualization of the American family was a dynamic



learning process. Mending the fractured community required the efforts of all members of society and demanded multiple adjustments along the way.

For example, in their efforts to solve the problem, moral reformers initially aimed for the moral uplift of the male youth, but later realized that education requires discipline. The intellectual and moral boost also requires legislation of new laws and the proper authorities to enforce these new laws. Moral reformers also discovered that it was just as important to pursue the moral uplift of women, as it was to advance the moral uplift of the men. With time, society realized that the interests of community and individual do not have to contradict each other.

Instead, both interests can complement each other for the better benefit of the entire society. If the individuals of society pursued their self-interests rationally, the whole community would benefit socially and economically. One wonders if our society would have been different today if those respectable families, in 1830s cities, had opened their doors to young men so that they might socialize with the virtuous. Would prostitution have been a legal profession? How different would our behaviors today have been if it were not for the laws of the 1830s?