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### The impact of industrialisation

Andrew Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions. Madness and Society in Britain, 1700–1900* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 26–33.

Andrew Scull is one of the most prolific and influential writers on the history of insanity in the nineteenth century. Scull's work serves as a criticism of self-congratulatory Whiggish accounts of the rise of psychiatry and the mental hospitals as situated within a moral and humane enlightenment project. He puts forward critical accounts which focus on control and coercion within the institutional system, thus raising historical debate concerning the tension between actors' claims to moral, humane approaches and the asylum practices themselves that show increasing regulation and control as necessary to produce and manage 'docile bodies'. This particular book is a re-exploration and expansion of an earlier study – *Museums of Madness: The Social Organisation of Insanity in Nineteenth Century England* (London, Allen Lane, 1979). Scull discusses the transformation in practices and notions of madness that underlay the change from the domestic care of insanity to an institutionalised system. He also demonstrates how the institutional system ratified the legitimacy of the new psychiatric profession, and that, as the asylums became more overcrowded, the doctors' stated aims of treatment and cure became impossible to achieve.

... [T]he limited growth of the private trade in lunacy, and the parallel creation of a number of charity asylums, serve to demonstrate that the traditional, family-based response to insanity (and indeed to all forms of dependency) was beginning to be questioned and abandoned, a process which gathered steam as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Those who see this process, and the asylum's ultimate triumph in the nineteenth century, as a relatively direct and uncomplicated consequence of

the rise of an urban-industrial society argue that the rise of segregative forms of social control represented a 'natural' response to the inability of a community – and household-based relief system to cope with the vastly greater problems created by this new form of social organization. In Mechanic's words, 'Industrialization and technological change . . . , coupled with increasing urbanization brought decreasing tolerance for bizarre and disruptive behavior and less ability to contain deviant behavior within the existing social structure.<sup>12</sup> The increased geographical mobility of the population and the anonymity of existence in the urban slums were combined with the destruction of the old paternal relationships which went with a stable, hierarchically organized rural society. Furthermore, the situation of the poor and dependent classes, huddled together in the grossly overcrowded conditions which accompanied the explosive, unplanned growth of urban and industrial centres became simultaneously more visible and more desperate . . .

The suggestion is that families in these conditions were much less capable of sustaining a non-productive member, and that both the scale of the problems and the anonymity of urban existence threatened the easy and uncomplicated system of relief which had sufficed in earlier times. Though for a long time the implications of these developments were evaded, and 'the whole frame of historical and economic reference remained agrarian in an economy undergoing an industrial revolution', eventually the new problems posed by poverty and dependence in an urban environment had to be faced. . . . [D]espite their growing conviction that many of the poor were 'underserving', the new class of entrepreneurs could not wholly avoid making some provision for them, if only because of the revolutionary threat they posed to the social order. The asylum – and analogous institutions such as the workhouse – allegedly constituted their response to this situation.

But there are serious problems with this line of argument. While the proportion of town dwellers in England rose sharply from the late eighteenth century onwards, the process of urbanization was simply not as far advanced as this account necessarily implies when pressures developed to differentiate and institutionalize the deviant population . . . [A]lthough large towns absorbed an increasing proportion of the English population, city dwellers remained a distinct minority during the first decades of the nineteenth century, by which time powerful pressures were already being exerted to secure the establishment of lunatic asylums (and other segregative forms of social control) on a compulsory

<sup>12</sup> David Mechanic, *Mental Health and Social Policy* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 54.

basis. London, it is true, already had a population of 840,000 in 1801, and grew to contain more than a million people by 1811 – but it remained unique. In 1801, there were only six other cities with a population of more than 50,000; by 1811, there were eight; by 1821, there were twelve, including three which had passed the 100,000 mark. More significantly, at the turn of the century, ‘only one third [of the English population] lived in a town of any size, only one in six in a town over 20,000.’

By themselves, these figures suggest that the notion that it was *urban* poverty which forced the adoption of an institutional response to deviance is by no means as self-evident as is commonly assumed. And when one looks for direct, concrete evidence of such a connection, one’s faith in the traditional wisdom is still further diminished. During the initial growth of the private madhouse trade in the eighteenth century, the ‘regions most conspicuous for asylum building were not the industrial boom-towns. Georgian private asylums commonly sprang up away from dense population centres, in Kent, Sussex, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, etc; and their catchments [*sic*] areas were quite restricted.’ The pattern is not altered much, as we shall see, even in the opening decades of the nineteenth century: in 1808 local magistrates were given discretionary power to provide asylum accommodation for pauper lunatics. Whether any given county adopted this solution to the problem of the dependent insane bore little or no relationship to the degree of urbanization of its population. While Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, two of the most heavily populated counties in England, were among the first to plan and open county asylums, Middlesex, the most densely populated county in the country, made no effort to do so until 1827, and then acted only under the spur of direct Parliamentary pressure. None of the counties in the West Midlands, along with the North the most industrialized and urbanized region of England, built an asylum until 1845, when they were compelled to do so. At the other end of the scale, the second county to open an asylum under the 1808 Act (in 1812) was small, rural Bedfordshire. Other rural counties exhibited a similar enthusiasm for the institutional solution at a comparatively early date. Indeed, the majority of the asylums built on the basis of the permissive act were situated in rural counties: Norfolk (1814), Lincolnshire (1820), Cornwall (1820), Gloucestershire (1823), Suffolk (1829), Dorset (1832), Kent (1833).

No clear-cut connection exists, therefore, between the rise of large asylums and the growth of large cities. Instead, I suggest that the main driving force behind the rise of a segregative response to madness (and to other forms of deviance) can much more plausibly be asserted to lie in the effects of a mature capitalist market economy and the

associated ever more thoroughgoing commercialization of existence. While the urban conditions produced by industrialization had a direct impact which was originally limited in geographical scope, the market system observed few such restrictions, and had increasingly subversive effects on the whole traditional rural and urban social structure. These changes in turn prompted the abandonment of long-established techniques for coping with the poor and troublesome . . .

Some may object that these contentions rest upon a chronological confusion: that the rise of capitalism in England occurred too early to be plausibly invoked as the explanation for events occurring in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. But such criticism is itself confused and misplaced, for I am concerned here not simply with the initial moves towards commercialized production and the rise of a market of national reach and scope, but with the massive reorganization of an entire society along market principles . . . And this takes place only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

[. . .]

The changing structure of the English economy from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards undermined and then destroyed the old order. An ever more robust and abrasive commercialism established itself in every realm of social existence, scurrying around in search of opportunities for profit, and remorselessly broadening the geographical scope of the market. Profound shifts occurred in the relationships between the superordinate and the subordinate classes, and in upper-class perceptions of their responsibilities towards the less fortunate – changes which can be summarized as the transition from a master-servant to an employer-employee relationship; from a social order dominated by rank, order, and degree, to one based on class. There emerged a ‘general sense of betrayal of paternal responsibilities by the naked exercise of the power of property’. As part of the general change from regulated to self-regulating markets, centuries-old legislation protecting workers’ standard of living and conditions of work was abolished. Increasingly, ‘the process of acquisition set the terms on which other social processes were allowed to operate’. Capitalism broke the social bonds which had formerly held it in check, and a modern commercial consumer society was born.

[. . .]

The economy as a whole came under the sway of the notion that ‘[the employer] owed his employees wages, and once these were paid, the men had no further claim on him’.

Thus, just as surely as urbanization, the market when given its head destroyed the traditional links between rich and poor which had characterized the old order. The ‘great transformation’ wrought by the advent of a thoroughly market-oriented society sharply reduced the *capacity* of the lower orders to cope with economic reverses. Wage-earners, whether they were agricultural labourers or the early representatives of an urban proletariat, shared a similar incapacity to make adequate provision for periods of economic depression. Quite apart from the centres of urbanization and industrialization, and to a much greater degree than the geographically limited scope of these processes would indicate, the burgeoning market economy was rendering anachronistic the idealized conception of a population living amidst ‘the ever-sustaining resources of an uncomplicated rural parish’. To make matters worse, along with the closing off of alternatives other than wage work as a means of providing for subsistence went the tendency of the primitive capitalist economy to oscillate wildly and unpredictably between conditions of boom and slump.

All in all, among the lower classes in this period, family members unable to contribute effectively towards their own maintenance must have constituted a serious drain on family resources. In the situation which they faced, ‘any interruption of the ability to work or the availability of a job spelt dire want . . . The aged and children became a greater burden . . .’, as, of course, did the insane. Consequently, while a family-based system of caring for the mad may never have worked especially well, one suspects that by the turn of the century it was likely to have been functioning particularly badly.

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