

Victorian anthropology paradox: another solution

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Abstract. Parts of the Victorian middle class were troubled by how Victorian society was both highly evolved and contained savage parts. I propose a solution to the paradox they faced.

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“She may seem beyond even gravitational pull

But sometimes my mistress is a raging bull”

A historian of anthropology tells us of how members of the Victorian middle class were both impressed and troubled by their society. They were troubled by groups within it, whom they regarded as savage:

The survival of such “savagery” in a world of unprecedented progress was one of the more disturbing of the cultural paradoxes experienced by thoughtful members of the Victorian middle classes. (1987: 214)

These thoughtful members of Victorian society believed in a unilinear direction of social evolution from savage to civilized. And yet while there was the opportunity for the savage groups within it to join others in becoming civilized, they did not. Why not? Why do they not advance with everyone else, given that they too have the opportunity to do so? And can this society even be classified as one far along the evolutionary sequence if there are these parts which do not change their behaviour in the direction of greater civility? Such were the questions asked.

I shall leave aside the classification question. Regarding the first question,

perhaps some members of savage groups did not see much difference between their practices and those of the thoughtful Victorian middle class. Imagine two affluent Victorian ladies disputing over the height of a hedge. The dispute eventually enters the law courts, with one party complaining that the other's hedge is slightly above regulation requirements. I don't know if such disputes occurred, but let's work with this example. A so-called savage of that time might say, "This is not much different from two of our women fighting with each other." The discriminations that the thoughtful Victorian middle class make between physical violence and this kind of dispute they do not make, attending perhaps more to the raw emotions involved.

Reference

Stocking Jr., G.W. 1987. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.