The New Victorianism

“A man...lives not only in the spot which he personally occupies, but in every spot to which he may extend his action, or to which he may conceive it possible that his action should be extended. And so, wherever over the world British influence penetrates, or can conceive itself penetrating, there, and not in the mere islands where we have our footing, Great Britain lives”. (David Masson quoted in Goodlad, 2009, p. 441)

This is 2001. As on any other weeknight, there was the familiar ringing of the dinner bell. Standing in the Senior Common Room, under a four-foot tall portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, and a flag of Australia so large that the “Union Jack” portion stood out immensely, I had sherry with the Master before dinner. We would enter the dining hall, in a procession led by the Master, and would seat ourselves at the High Table (on a stage, above all others). We were all dressed in black robes. A Latin invocation was always recited by one of the leading students at a lower table. The hall was ringed by portraits of elderly men with mutton chops and ladies with fine spectacles and white gloves. After dinner, we had a glass of port, again with the Master and the Dean of this residential college in Adelaide. On one night, a student sang “I am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General,” from the Victorian opera of Gilbert and Sullivan, The Pirates of Penzance. However, if a student had been late to dinner, then the after dinner entertainment was the student getting a “ponding”: a bell would be rung, increasingly rapidly, and then the student would be flung by his peers—robe and all—into the pond, usually with much laughter. The students were from wealthy families, some connected to the political elite of the country. The main building was named after the family of the then Foreign Minister. With that as my experience, and not even distant but recent, an essay such as this was inevitably going to come some day.

有意思的 Victorian Precedents and Foundations

Not Great Britain, but really a Greater Britain is what was envisioned in the opening quote. The existence of a Greater Britain makes sense when we see how often the British and their offspring settler states, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US, work in concert and share many of the same ideological princi-
ples. That is not just an accidental correspondence. Instead, it is the basic historical link that makes it possible and logical to draw comparisons.

The symbol of Queen Victoria, more than that of any other British monarch, still casts a long shadow over the United Kingdom and Commonwealth nations and, as I will argue, even the US. Leaving aside Britain itself, in Canada Victoria Day is still celebrated as a national holiday (the only holiday in honour of a monarch), every city seems to have a Victoria Square, a street named after Victoria, and perhaps a statue of Victoria. There is a long list of Queen Victoria statues around the world, which includes Montreal where I work. In Australia, an entire state is named after her, and in Canada the capital of British Columbia is also named Victoria—people resident in such locations are thus at least nominal “Victorians”. In Trinidad & Tobago, I once passed through Victoria County. Universities are named after her, whether Victoria University (Australia), Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand), the University of Victoria (Canada), or in other cases where her name is implied as in Queen’s University. In the English-speaking world, most of us will have read or heard something about “the Victorian Era,” whose duration was, at a minimum, the same as her reign (1837–1901), though in actuality historians disagree on the real time span of “Victorianism” and how to define it, or whether there ever was a Victorian period (Hewitt, 2006, p. 434). There is always difficulty in defining chronological limits: as Hewitt (2006, p. 395) argues, “all historical periods have only partial validity”—but while “historical boundaries are permeable” they are also methodologically necessary. At the very least, “Victorianism” can be a useful heuristic device for thinking about the culture of empire in the Anglo-American worlds in the North Atlantic and the South Pacific.

A minimalist argument for the existence of Victorianism is rooted in observing the extent to which the political geography of the British colonial world was renamed after Queen Victoria, making it appear that her reign serves as a major if not canonical reference point in the Anglophone world. A more maximal argument sees that there is a concentration of key social, economic, and political changes “around the margins of Victoria’s reign” and that it would thus seem “counterintuitive not to think of the Victorian as a period, whether conceived of as lodged between the profound transformations of the Romantic era and the emergence of Modernism, or situated between a long eighteenth century and the twentieth-century world” (Hewitt, 2006, p. 396). What thinking in terms of a
“Victorian period” does not have to assume is that there was a special significance about the reign of Victoria herself; that the period’s beginning and end must have abrupt and clear demarcations; or, that any changes that took place during the period should be ignored. Perhaps above all, the value lies in seeing the timeframe as possessing a series of unique and widely applicable characteristics “usually defined in terms of ‘zeitgeist,’ ‘temper,’ or ‘spirit of the age’” (Hewitt, 2006, p. 396). In this vein, Hewitt argues that there was a “Victorian pattern”: “a set of configurations that include institutional forms, legal frameworks, conceptual understandings and rhetorics, regimes of knowledge, technological capacities, and characteristic cultural forms and processes” (2006, p. 397).

In terms of the industrial revolution, and its social revolution (class society, rise of the bourgeoisie), plus the bureaucratization of the state and myriad other developments, Hewitt argues that the idea of a “Victorian period” still makes sense, and I agree.

We should also remember how it was during the Victorian period—for the most part not thanks to Queen Victoria herself, to be clear—that many of the foundations were laid for our current thinking and our current debates. For example, some of the period’s key intellectual developments include:

- Racial theories, “scientific racism”;
- Photographic realism (Hewitt, 2006, p. 412);
- A “Victorian New World Order” (Young, 2009), compressing representations of the imperial-dominated globe in events such as the Great Exhibition of 1851;
- Globalism, as we now call it, ushered in then by the telegraph and railways, “annihilating time and space” (in the language of the time);
- Cosmopolitanism, in literature, philosophy, and styles of living (including the advent of tourism);
- Imperialism, as a political term and as focus of theories of political economy;
- The “working class” (Hewitt, 2006, p. 399) appeared as a concept, along with socialist philosophies;
- Evolutionism and its discourse of “progress” and the ideologies of progressivism it spawned;
- The prestige of scientific elites and the development of a technocratic class;
- The “avalanche of numbers” as Thomas Kuhn called it, appearing from around 1840, with all the censuses, statistics, classification, coding,
documentation, registration, creation of police forces and philanthropic inspection (Hewitt, 2006, p. 417);

- The “problem of order” and the elites’ fear of the masses;
- The social sciences (anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, history) were first instituted in this period; and,
- Even scientific detective stories (where forensic analysis was crucial), plus science-fiction stories, and horror, were each established as popular genre in Britain’s 19th century.

Did Victorianism end with Victoria’s passing? Is there a New Victorianism, and if so, what does it encompass? If there is a New Victorianism, what are there basic structural and cultural similarities between the old and New Victorianism, and what do the commonalities tell us? What does this mean for how we understand history? As the reader will see, beyond the interests of antiquarians and Anglophiles the answers to these questions can be of much wider importance to understanding the present, and where we might be headed next.

First, (old) “Victorianism” needs to be summarized to get some definitional grasp of it. As a precursor of what we now call “globalization,” Victorianism is seen by some as marking the triumph over distance: “Victorianism remains associated with industrialism, urbanization, transport, technologies, travel, and communication” (MacRaild, 2005). Salient features of Victorian society are poverty, drunkenness, pornography, prostitution, increased confrontation with the reality of homosexuality, and growing religious pluralism. Occurring during the industrial revolution, Victorianism is inevitably associated with technological innovation; with the advent of electricity, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, photography and the beginnings of film, the foundations were laid in the Victorian era for the key information and communication technologies of today.

There was a Victorian “globalism” given how “the Victorians celebrated the telegraph for its capacity to make their world smaller and more immediately manageable” (the telegraph serving as the “Victorian Internet” in the words of a recent writer). Victorians were fascinated with the new technology and how it transformed their conceptions of time and space. Routinely it was asserted that the telegraph had “annihilated time and space” with similar remarks made about railways. These technologies were heralded as an instrument for the “spread of Victorian values” that would revolutionize the “moral and intellectual nature and action of mankind”” (Morus, 2000, p. 456). Instituting the Greenwich time
signal (GMT), transmitted via telegraph, was something designed to achieve the
global standardization of time (Morus, 2000, p. 457).

Victorianism also marked the maximum expansion of British imperialism,
and the rise of financialization. Liberal humanitarian intervention was first de-
veloped in Victorian Britain and exported to its colonies. At home, in terms of
social mores, Victorianism is also typically identified as the classic case of a mor-
alizing, prudish, and repressed society (again, some scholars reject this usage of
“Victorianism”). What does this have to do with us?

The New Victorian Era and
Neoliberalism in North America

“How America entering a new Victorian Era?” asked Michael Barone in an essay in
widely unanticipated trends — certainly unanticipated by me — suggest that
America is in some significant respects entering a new Victorian Era”. While it
may be important to note that there is a tinge of partisanship in the fact that it is
mostly conservative US publications which are the ones to highlight the emer-
gence of the “New Victorianism,” it may not be the most significant observation,
nor is the focus of their critique necessarily partisan. However, unlike Canada,
the US is home to a long-standing conservative, republican tradition of criticism
of liberal imperialism, and it is therefore not surprising that with a liberal imper-
ialist order currently possessing power, that critiques should once again emerge
from this quarter. For me, their ideas are useful and productive, because they
point to certain historical parallels between two closely related empires—closely
related in cultural and demographic terms, and closely related in terms of tempo-
ral overlap and shared interests between dominant elites. How two distinct em-
pires, separated in time and space, can share common elements in their individual
declines may be important, but it could also be coincidence. Not all empires de-
cline the same way, though some see certain broad trends that recur, as in the
award-winning documentary The Four Horsemen (Renegade Inc., 2013), where
it is argued, following Sir John Glubb’s The Fate of Empires (1976), that there
are similarities in the “life-cycles of empires,” with empires on average lasting ap-
proximately 250 years. There are similarities also in the decadent, terminal phase
of an empire, with key recurring features including,
1) “an undisciplined, overextended military”;
2) “the conspicuous display of wealth”;
3) “massive disparity between rich and poor”;
4) “a desire to live off a bloated state”;
5) “an obsession with sex”; and,
6) “the debasement of the currency”.

There may be broad similarities. However, when you look more closely, differences stand out: “obsession with sex” in one instance may mean moral laxity and growing promiscuity (by the challenged standards of a time), but in another the sexual obsession is the reverse, involving excessive regulation.

One argument I think we can make is that when two culturally similar and temporally proximate empires decline, they decline in a roughly similar cultural fashion. I would suggest seeing both the British and US empires as two basically Anglo-Saxon entities, with shared moral codes, shared ideologies, shared language and a shared literature, mutual training of elites, shared population, and so forth. More than that, both experienced similar cultural and ideological trends, in a period of growing global competition and increased overextension, with social strife at home. Just as the Victorian period preceded the withdrawal of the UK from its colonial empire, I am suggesting that the New Victorianism in the US may be one of the signs of the impending withdrawal of the US from its neo-colonial empire—in other words, we may be nearing the end of the “New Imperialism”.

**Victorian Parallels in the New Imperialism**

“The New Imperialism” is not a very efficient conceptual phrase since it requires a lot of labour to clarify what one means each time one invokes it. For me, one of the noteworthy features of this particular phrase is that it came into currency at two notable points in history: first at the end of the 1800s in Britain, and again just over a century later in the US. In other words, the phrase is both Victorian in origin and possibly “New Victorian” in its revival.

While much has been written and spoken about “Manifest Destiny” and “American Exceptionalism” at the core of an ethos of US expansion, something similar could be said about Victorian Britain. Britain had its own exceptionalism
and manifest destiny: many of its political and intellectual elites saw the UK as morally bound to spread liberty and enlightenment around the world. Victorian imperial self-opinion was exceptionalist: “the Victorian public ‘believe[d] that Britain held a unique position in the world’ and ‘liked to believe both in British benevolence and British power’” (Chamberlain quoted in Goodlad, 2009, p. 441).

As I outlined in “The ‘New’ Imperialism of Militarization, Humanitarianism, and Occupation” (2010) there are several contending and overlapping meanings of “the New Imperialism”. Its meanings have ranged from:

a) a renewed expansion of empire, but without founding colonies of settlement;
b) indirect, neocolonial rule;
c) imperial expansion in the midst of growing international competition from rival empires;
d) the rise of “humanitarian” justifications for intervention abroad—and the “duty” to spread Western civilization; to,
e) the emergence of the “new empire” which referred strictly to the US, especially after the Spanish-American War of 1898 (see: Walter LaFeber’s The New Empire [1963, 1998]; also, US Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, author of the classic The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783, presented arguments for US overseas expansion to develop new markets to absorb industrial overproduction in the US, surely beating Lenin to the theoretical punch).

The latter point, (e), can cause understandable confusion, because it would mean that either that there were two US “new” imperialisms, or that the US new imperialism never stopped being new, even after developing through two centuries.

Provisional Decline

What seems to be especially different about the contemporary period, compared with what came at the end of British empire, is the apparent lack of any power today that entertains ambitions of global dominance that rival those of the current hegemon. Even the much vaunted BRICS are arguably being reduced to RIC, and none of these has made any serious effort toward building a world empire—even their ascendancy owes a great deal to their relationship with US-based capital and US financial institutions. As for empires ending, we should be
aware that while empires may exist on average for about 250 years, each of the
last imperial powers post-1650 continues to possess imperial tailings even after
decolonization: Britain, France, and Holland each still possess actual or quasi-
colonies, and they continue to be active in the affairs of financial dominance and
military intervention, even if mostly through NATO. It even took Spain an-
other century to be dispossessed of all of its colonies after the South American
wars of liberation.

The end of empire may not be as total, absolute, and final as some of us
might have thought; conversely, the presence of an imperialist action is not nec-
essarily evidence of untroubled continuity. The end of US empire is therefore
not likely to spell the end of either US military interventions abroad or end its
ability or will to dominate over at least some other nations. Nonetheless, the end
of US empire will significantly reshape the world as we know it.

Old and New Victorianism: Broad Parallels

Underneath the basic structuring fact of empire that operates in both the Old
and New Victorianism, there is a whole series of repetitions, renewals, replications
and reworkings. In broad terms, we find the following structural forces and
cultural phenomena both in late 19th century Britain and the US of the early 21st
century:

- Ruling elites’ emphases on trade, charity/philanthropy, and “good gov-
ernance”;
- Embroiled in Afghanistan;
- Rising competitors (see the caveats above);
- Increased proletarianization;
- A shift from industrialization to financialization (end of the 19th cen-
tury in Britain, end of the 20th century in the US);
- Speculative bubbles (railway booms and busts in the 19th century, dot
  com and mortgage booms and busts in the late 20th and early 21st cen-
turies);
- The development of “informal empire” (empire without colonies of
  settlement);
- The emergence of suburbia, and the literary tendency to criticize pro-
  vincial culture (Hewitt, 2006, p. 410);
- Growing risk aversion at home; and,
- Even the prevalence of long, styled beards.

Cosmopolitanism and Imperialism

As mentioned before, “cosmopolitanism” is present in both the Old Victorian period and the current period, having experienced a resurgence (at least in academia) in the 1990s. “Cosmopolitanism” seems to have meant many different things in the 19th century, perhaps more than now. Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill both called the globalization of capitalism “cosmopolitan”; the Kantian notion of the word was usually invoked in arguments that supported free trade; others reserved the term to describe highly contagious diseases; for others still, it meant bourgeois decadence and rootlessness (Agathocleous & Rudy, 2010, p. 389). There was also an inclination in Victorian times to use the word pejoratively, as others have noted, with the word used to refer to shadowy arrivistes and wealthy transnational types. There was not so much of the tolerance, multiculturalism, and world citizenship that the term now evokes—in the Victorian period, it could even be used in an anti-Semitic fashion, as a label for the wandering Jew. That there was greater ambivalence in Victorian times around cosmopolitanism is possibly due to the concept being at the dividing line between capitalist and colonial expansion and a British sense of heritage and rootedness (Goodlad, 2009, p. 439).

What is similar between then and now are the stakes of the debates around cosmopolitanism—the stakes being whether cosmopolitanism is the “false song of globalism,” a new imperialism, or an ethos that attempts to embrace all of humanity (Agathocleous & Rudy, 2010, p. 390). But as some have concluded, it is never possible to disassociate Victorian cosmopolitanism from imperialism: “Empire, after all, was the condition of possibility for all forms of cosmopolitanism, whether conceived as lifestyle, ideology, or knowledge” (Agathocleous & Rudy, 2010, p. 392). Much the same could be said about cosmopolitanism today.
Trivial Pursuits? Looking into Beards

The point above about beards goes back to the essay meant to precede this one, “The Ultimate Proletarian and the Neoliberal Condition,” where I wrote of the body adornment fixations of urbane cosmopolitans, both the upper class kind and those in the middle-class who follow their lead in fashion, that is, those aspirants/dependents whose lifestyles are artificially sustained by lines of credit and college degrees (Forte, 2016b). No longer reserved for the marginalized, which in North America would be the so-called “hillbillies” and “hippies,” beards were also refashioned to join the “respectable mainstream” in Victorian Britain, just as they have in the contemporary US. Noting the likely influence of the appearance of “hirsute soldiers” sent to fight in Crimea, Oldstone-Moore (2005, pp. 7–8) quotes the following from Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine:

“Already the martial moustache, the haughty imperial, and the daily expanding whiskers, like accredited heralds, proclaim the approaching advent of the monarch Beard; the centuries of his banishment are drawing to their destined close, and the hour and the man are at hand to re-establish his ancient reign”.

Martial, imperial, monarch—one can see not only the inflated self-glorification, but also how personal styles can ultimately derive their meaning and social place from imperialism. Marginalized classes and revolutionaries thus saw their beards symbolically expropriated by the dominant elites and those who style themselves after them. In addition to empire, the question of industrialism is relevant—if in the Victorian period industrialization “incited increasingly complicated and anxious efforts to claim new forms of status and to construct new hierarchies of authority” (James Eli Adams quoted in Oldstone-Moore,
then contemporary deindustrialization along with innovation of a supposed “knowledge” economy should be expected to reintroduce similar (dis)comforts. The display of the beard was understood as an assertion of masculinity, individuality, liberty, and chivalry.

In the present, explanations for the rise in popularity of beards in the US seem to be all over the place, but with some strong echoes of the earlier themes outlined above. Cyril Grueter, an evolutionary biologist, explains that beards and other forms of body ornamentation function as a way for primates to display masculine strength (Macphail, 2015), the beard serving as a “badge of status” (see Grueter, Isler, & Dixson, 2015). In a way, the beard is a sign of trouble (my interpretation), signalling anxiety emerging from competition and increased social complexity—or as Grueter explained,

“When you live in a small group where everyone knows everyone because of repeated interactions, there is no need to signal quality and competitiveness via ornaments. In large groups where individuals are surrounded by strangers, we need a quick reliable tool to evaluate someone’s strength and quality, and that’s where these elaborate ornaments come in. In the case of humans, this may also include phenotypic extensions such as body decoration, jewellery and prestige items”. (Stacey, 2015)

A shortage of women may also be one of the causes for the popularity of beards in Victorian Britain, according to Grueter and his colleagues.

Robert Pellegrini, a US psychologist who studied beard trends, argued in a manner echoing Victorian concerns that, “the male beard communicates an heroic image of the independent, sturdy, and resourceful pioneer, ready, willing and able to do manly things” (Withey, 2014).

Alun Withey, a medical historian, sees the beard as an expression of “masculinity under threat” given “changing gender, sexual and emotional boundaries, and the pressures of modern life”. With reference to the Victorian period, Withey (2014) writes:

“In the mid-nineteenth century, Victorian men were faced by a range of new challenges. On the one hand was the need to adapt to working environments, as massive firms imposed new corporate hierarchies and structures. Perhaps more importantly, though, women were beginning to find a voice and to offer a raft of entirely logical arguments against their continued subjection. How did men respond? By cultivating massive beards!”
For Coline Covington (2009), a psychoanalyst, “the trend does raise questions about what is happening to men in our culture and why this sudden assertion of masculinity?” She answers her question:

“It seems no coincidence that beards are on the rise at a time when the West is struggling with a world recession and the position of powerful men is under threat. It is arguably much tougher these days to be an alpha male and what better way to stand out than with a beard?”

In addition to similar trends and explanations, linking the Old Victorian and New Victorian periods, a “data enthusiast” writing for *GQ* produced an interesting graph of beard trends that definitely shows two clear spikes around the Victorian period and the present, particularly in Europe and North America (Jannuzzi, 2015). The New Victorians do not just resemble the old Victorians, in some respects. The assertion of masculinity, individuality, liberty, and chivalry, plays out as well with reference to the objects of humanitarian concern: the damsel in distress.

The range of body ornamentation we see today—piercings, jewellery, dyed hair, tattoos, etc.—might also bring back to mind the Victorian exhibitionary complex (Hewitt, 2006, p. 415), but with an important twist. Today, rather than putting members of “exotic” tribes on display, we in some cases take their symbolism and place it on our skin, and become walking exhibitions ourselves—appropriated savagism. *Look at them* has become *look at me*. Before people would pay a price to look at others; now they pay a price to look like others.

**Victorian Humanitarianism, Identity Politics, and Free Trade: Then and Now**

The figure of the damsel in distress, of the weak and helpless woman begging to be saved, has paradoxically been revitalized by bourgeois Western feminism and the politics of the US State Department, under George W. Bush and especially under Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Gender identity politics have been exploited to persecute the persecuted, and have been a useful tool in anti-anti-imperialism. The critic of empire, fabricated as a “rapist” to then be duly demonized, knows how this works. Thus Julian Assange “pointed to a longstanding nexus between identity politics and imperialism, including the 19th century inter-
ventions by British imperialism into the Ottoman Empire that were justified on the pretext of protecting the rights of women” (Tiernan, 2016).

Rather than a sudden revival after a century or more, there is a strong continuity linking the missionary and “friendly societies” of 19th century Britain, with the various charities to placate the exploited working class at home, and a variety of “aboriginal protection” and “emancipationist” lobbies to manage the exploited and dispossessed in the colonies, and their contemporary counterparts in the form of numerous NGOs and philanthropic foundations, from Rockefeller to Bill Gates. The work of philanthropic NGOs in the service of the New Imperialism is discussed in “Imperial Abduction Lore and Humanitarian Seduction” (Forte, 2014). There I spelled out how we are witnessing the revival, reworking and globalization of aboriginal management technologies, exemplified in the 19th century with the creation of assimilationist Indian Schools or Residential Schools, with the three key operating principles being abduction (understood according to a wide range of meanings), protection, and amelioration.

In the continuum from the old Victorianism to the new, humanitarianism in the form of what some call “philanthropic colonialism” is an especially distinctive feature. Humanitarian intervention and philanthropic management that sidelines the state brings into play a wide array of mutually reinforcing factors, from martial paternalism, to assumptions of pastoral care in tutoring wards. What has developed in recent decades, far beyond its origins in Victorian Britain, is a supplement to capitalism called “conscience laundering” by Peter Buffett (2013), a philanthropist and son of the billionaire US tycoon Warren Buffett. Peter Buffett described conscience laundering as follows:

“Inside any important philanthropy meeting, you witness heads of state meeting with investment managers and corporate leaders. All are searching for answers with their right hand to problems that others in the room have created with their left”. (Buffett, 2013)

Speaking of the alleged improvements brought about by philanthropic foundations, Buffett asks if “doesn’t this all just feed the beast”. In fact, what he calls the Charitable-Industrial Complex typically invests in projects that will boost future labour productivity, hence the concern with healthcare in areas of Africa that are producers of strategic and other valuable minerals and natural resources more broadly.
The Old Victorian attitude to empire reflected a mix of concerns, interests and apprehensions, familiar to us today. It has become a standard menu. As Deirde David put it, Victorians,

“occasionally worried about the European erosion of native customs, often uneasy about the domestic prices demanded for the maintenance of distant territories, frequently fearful of the consequences of British invasion and subjugation, some times infatuated with the exotic delights of alien cultures, and periodically attentive to what is construed as the moral responsibility of imperial rule”. (quoted in Ledbetter, 2004, p. 266)

In terms of empire as moral responsibility, we see one of the most direct, strongest links between the Old and New Victorianism. In an 1847 British magazine for Victorian ladies, we read about a massacre in Africa in these terms: “assuredly, in the year 1847 of the Christian era, a scene so horrible as that narrated above ought not to stain the page of modern record” (quoted in Ledbetter, 2004, p. 265). In 2011, we hear the president of the United States say this about an alleged massacre threatened in Africa, specifically Libya: “if we waited one more day, Benghazi, a city nearly the size of Charlotte, could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world” (Obama, 2011). In both cases, imperialism is sold as a stain remover for the world’s moral conscience. Both in Old and New Victorian discourse, there is a special focus on the current year of the speaker/writer, as if the high point of human evolution had been achieved by this date, a date that can be used as a progressivist benchmark for judging the state of the world and for deciding what is not acceptable.

The Victorian emphasis on free trade, philanthropy and the imposition of “good governance” abroad, are recognized themes of the period (see Halstead, 1983). While too large a topic, and too complicated to address in this relatively short space, humanitarian interventionism abroad, and its counterpart at home (reformism that exploits small minorities, so as to misdirect attention away from class issues and towards systemically less expensive identity politics), is something that unfolds within liberal imperialism. Multiculturalism is good business for the (neo)liberal order: it breaks attachments to place (singular loyalty to the nation), it promotes free-floating populations. Those who claim to despise “factionalism” (in the false name of liberal unity), are the very ones who parade the factions. This process helps to break overdue reform down into token, bite-sized
packets. Reform increasingly becomes a symbolism emptied of anything concrete, where “insults” (actual or imagined) are treated as if they were the gravest of all social concerns.

We can thus find political elites today who seem to think that by winning the votes of African-Americans, this will attract the admiration, approval, and support from white voters (which real persons would ever vote that way?)—without having first resolved the roots of inter-racial divisions. It is a flawed and desperate strategy to prevent the decline of the elites.

The spread of the neoliberal mode of governance, with its emphases on international legal standardization (for private business, human rights, etc.) is part of this longstanding liberal imperialist project with champions from William Gladstone in Victorian Britain to Woodrow Wilson in the US shortly thereafter, and again in the US since the 1980s, and with particular intensity since 2008 with the election of Obama. The emphasis on rescuing, recognizing or rewarding particular social segments according to the politics of identity is an especially sharp expression of the neoliberal approach, whose primary emphasis (according to the doctrines of Hayek and von Mises) is on freedom of choice (free expression for all sorts of identity claims fits well), and stands against freedom from hardship (which would redirect attention toward class issues).

The shift from mercantilism to free trade in the 19th century also meant a shift in the state getting its revenue from income tax rather than from customs and excise duties (Hewitt, 2006, p. 401). This shift in the burden of taxation, necessarily shifted the political focus and the economic burden to the individual. This shift is now taken for granted, to the extent that few politicians or commentators in our press can explain how greater protectionism in international trade could correspond with lower personal taxes—they are mystified by this, as if it were the trick of a demagogue rather than a more mathematical logic. (Personally, I think they know better, but would rather keep public discourse suitably impoverished.)

Social Imperialism? New Victorianism’s Domestic Moral Code and the Political Economy of Identity Politics

“The nation-state in its imperialist guise was the inescapable context within which all political action necessarily took place: it determined the range of
possibilities against which the left as much as the right were compelled to define their positions”. (Eley, 1976, p. 269)

“Social imperialism,” applied to German historiography, involves some interesting coincidences with Victorianism and the New Imperialism. One of the key political figures was Kaiser Wilhelm II, German Emperor, and the eldest grandchild of Britain’s Queen Victoria. Wilhelm also presided over the expansion of the German navy in the wake of the Scramble for Africa, with some of the key ideas of the German Navy League being inspired by the US’ New Imperialism and by Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*.

“Social imperialism” is a contested concept, with Eley (1976) showing the divisions around using it to refer to socialists’ accommodation with capitalism and adhesion to imperialist practice abroad (a contemporary phenomenon that also manifested in the early 1900s) plus making concessions to reformism, versus the work of policy-makers in distracting increasingly impoverished workers from exploitation at home by diverting their energies toward external enemies, in order to negate reform and preserve the status quo. (For those who are curious, Eley largely disproves the value of the second formulation.) There is actually more to this debate than this short sketch allows, but what I want to introduce is a third view of social imperialism, mindful of what both of the preceding conceptualizations essentially share in common: “Both are concerned with the impact of the imperialist world economy on the domestic life of the metropolis” (Eley, 1976, p. 268). “The entry of the imperialist idea into domestic politics” (Eley, 1976, p. 268)—and it is from domestic social and political conflict where the imperialist idea first emerges—should probably be rephrased as the “re-entry” of the imperialist idea into domestic politics, because what was deployed abroad produced effects and practices that later (always) come back home in new and improved form. This is a broader concept of “blowback” which I argued for in my work on “force multipliers” (see Forte 2015a, 2015b). The third variation I propose is not better, more valid than either of the earlier two approaches—it tries to supplement them without displacing them. The third approach focuses on how imperialist principles and practices shape and take form through domestic politics. Social imperialism in this third sense is about the politics within an imperialist society, that reflect its constitution as an imperialist society.
Essentially then, what we are talking about in the current phase is liberal imperialism at home. This is a marriage of the New Victorianism and the New Imperialism, in domestic matters, where politics are increasingly moralized, attention is directed towards identity issues in order to preserve basic class inequalities, reformism is limited and inexpensive (small rewards for small groups), democracy is reduced to procedures and is led by oligarchic elites, and the society is administered by a technocratic managerial class with a noteworthy penchant for ignoring criticisms, deflecting questions, and operating in secrecy.

What results, at least in the North American context, is a call for asserting certain codes of behaviour, to impose standards of proper conduct as seen through the eyes of the liberal middle class, defended with an astringent sanctimony that turns every transgression into a catastrophe. What does this have to do with imperialism? Quite a lot.

Security and safety were key Victorian principles. Safety was used to justify empire. Victorian British writers in prominent publications could justify Britain’s international posture as one compelled to be “defensive” against encroaching empires. Thus we could read comments such as these: “Britain must make herself safe. That is the first duty. There must be a navy sufficient to ride round and round her…” (David Masson quoted in Goodlad, 2009, p. 440).

Today, what we are witnessing is the domestic, social application of principles of securitization. The discourse of safety and security, imported from the “war on terror,” appears to have secured its greatest victory on university campuses, in parliaments and newspapers, and recently even around public toilets. What is different here about this form of securitization is that it is invited, to protect actual or imagined victims. “Radical vulnerability” (Einspruch, 2015) is practiced, and receives the concerted attention of professional sulkers and career pouters. Second, the affectation of delicacy, the veneer of gentle civility, masks the reality of a life lived thanks to heaps of brutality unloaded on others. Another aspect of this is to enforce a permanent infancy for those shielded from uncomfortable encounters with the realities created by their own lifestyles—and thus they establish a permanent claim to innocence. Third, a suitable moral system is entrenched, based on what elsewhere I call “moral dualism” (I am guilty of atrocity if I do not intervene to stop it elsewhere, and if my intervention creates atrocity then I am not to be held responsible), plus “moral narcissism” (“What you believe, or claim to believe or say you believe—not what you do or
how you act or what the results of your actions may be—defines you as a person and makes you ‘good’. It is how your life will be judged by others and by yourself...In 21st-century America, almost all of us seem to have concluded that ‘you are what you say you are’. You are what you proclaim your values to be, irrespective of their consequences” [Simon, 2016]). Adherents to this moral system thus privilege words over action, and feeling over knowledge. They are prone to issuing generous denunciations of others while offering lofty self-appraisals or perhaps half-hearted self-criticisms that only admit to a semblance of “unintentional poor judgment”. These are some of the more discursive and moralistic aspects of the New Victorianism, but there are also those that are closely related to capital accumulation.

In terms of capital, the liberal middle class and their dependent aspirants are deeply concerned with customization and upgrading, with status and profile. They are preoccupied with style, and engage in prolific self-fashioning: everything from nose- and toe-rings to the daily parade of photo selfies and the acerbic defence of brands (meaning, their personal names, their colour, or their ethnic or party affiliation). They are believers in self-determination and agency for themselves alone, they exclaim that their bodies are theirs to control, they proclaim monopoly rights over their treasured uteruses, and aided by neoliberal political entrepreneurs they create exclusive safe spaces for their kind—something similar to a no-fly zone—just as they passionately advocate for bombing in the defence of freedom, and for annulling referenda in the name of democracy. Such orientations of course present new investment opportunities for capitalists, expanding the economic potential of capital accumulation in the form of niche marketing, or even the provision of mere pixels for a price, organized in a pattern that pleases the always more discriminating eye. Finally, the basic pattern of capital extraction can be found in the relationship where comfort and safety is to be afforded to designated groups in the imperial metropolis, while demonization, marginalization, and outright destruction is wrought on the heads of others. The destruction of Libya? So what, we have transgender bathrooms now (forget that bathrooms were never gendered, but sexed).

Thus there are key elements of neoliberal capitalism at work here—the extraction of value, the financialization of intangibles, the commodification of identities, the privatization of representation, and the spatial/societal differentiation
of losses and gains. Accumulation by dispossession is not a problem for “activists” (practitioners), as much as who gets to dispossess whom and by how much.

Fortunately, quite a few observers have taken note and have critically commented on these developments in their society. Much of their focus so far has been on US college campuses, possibly because universities so freely violate their own long heralded proclamations of support for academic freedom and free speech. Now the campus has been subject to a no-fly zone of a sort, with safe spaces that resemble in principle the idea of “humanitarian corridors”. The “humanitarian crisis” at hand is due to the existence of an alleged “rape culture”—which brings to mind the hysterical denunciations by Westerners, all too willing to believe the myth of Libyan troops engaging in “systematic mass rape,” fuelled by Viagra. Everybody is now some kind of refugee, fleeing a perceived “evil”. They hold themselves to be “survivors,” in need of constant care. The language of security, protection, and humanitarian aid has reached orthodox heights, globally and now domestically, even as its speakers rail against those who reject free trade and open borders. Why, because what they want to be at stake is the fragment, or the insignificant, the minute, the superficial, the merely symbolic, and the status claims of a few—not the security and protection of the many closest to home whose dispossession worries them not even slightly (if they so much as recognize it). From behind the walls of their gated communities, they mightily denounce The Wall. This is the kind of social imperialism that largely escapes the received formulations outlined at the outset of this section.

What this form of social imperialism, different in scope and focus from previous conceptualizations, entails is the isomorphic translation within of the practices and logics of imperialism practiced abroad. Thus we see equivalents of the no-fly zone and humanitarian corridor concept. Securitization, the responsibility to protect, and humanitarian aid are all at work—not just as limited reformism, but as an attempt to misplace reform altogether. We also see a fusion of two phenomena: the special interest lobby at home, and the neo-tribal creations of Western colonial rule which relied on such surrogates for indirect rule based on divide-and-conquer principles.

Neo-Tribal Lobby Groups

Divide-and-rule is now regularly practiced at home. Thus we have the neo-tribal lobbies that have formed around sex, gender, and colour in North America—
each demanding recognition and rewards, and in their protests they reinforce the centrality of the elites, their state patrons, on whose kind attention they ultimately rely. Members of the college-based neoliberal left will cry about their “precarity” and then turn to shedding abundant tears for the EU after Brexit, gasping at the very short-lived plunge in stock markets, and denouncing the working-class as “racist” for damaging one of the world’s primary engines of neoliberalism that helped to cause their own precarity in the first place. Next, they may cry over the potential dissolution of NATO, and hold it up as a high representative of love, goodness, and humanity. One can safely conclude that one of the primary operations of this type of social imperialism is the basic act of mystification. Mystification, the primary goal of “soft power,” has two sides to it: abroad it unites (that is, it assimilates and joins to empire), and at home it divides (breaking up class by fomenting cleavages along identity lines).

The neo-tribal lobby groups deserve more attention. On occasion some may appear to have clearly instrumental practices—protests that serve to showcase the group, issuing demands, and brokering short-term gains to increase their visibility in order to solidify a basis for future action (for a recent example of this, see CBC, 2016). The street protests of the neo-tribal lobbies double as quasi-religious rituals: attendants gathered in respectful attention around the celebrants of the mass, the high priests of the protest movement delivering speeches, ringed by their acolytes (see CJAD, 2016, for another recent example). This may be accompanied before or after by a colourful procession through the streets. Identity itself thus becomes gentrified, the work of specialist gatekeepers trained in colleges (their eyes trained on the law, the distribution of resources, and their own careers), mounting regular public exhibitions of their identity claims through parades and demonstrations. Some universities even play an active role in training and then legitimizing the products of their training—just one nearby example is the University of Toronto’s “Centre for Women’s Studies in Education” and its support for “Black Lives Matter—Toronto” (the name of the movement suggesting an international franchise).

The hope of the gatekeepers is that through the vehicle of legal rights they might become a new addition to the rentier class: exercising monopoly rights over the appropriate and authentic representation of their social fragment. They will decide which words can be spoken, and by whom; which phrases are permissible; which patterns can be reproduced on clothing and commercial adverti-
ing; mascots will be subjected to harsh interrogation methods; and, they will decide who is entitled to do the act of representation to the media, the courts, the White House, and to gain any rewards that flow from that. However, as producers of spectacle consumed by others, the rents for now accrue entirely to capital, especially the capital behind Facebook, Twitter, and other social media—so they are “useful” to the rentier class that dominates the society (see Harvey, 2014, p. 278).

The new tribal lobbies of the New Victorianism expressly dislike class issues. They rightly fear that people’s attention might be drawn to the class divisions that operate within such groups themselves. The questions such leaders dread is that of their own exploitation of their followers, and how as leaders they went about appointing themselves to speak in their followers’ names.

Recent commentary on different aspects of this New Victorianism has been useful, even if it sometimes comes from surprising quarters. Surprising because neoliberals on the right ought to take heart at the formation of freedom-of-choice lobbies that play the game of capital accumulation on the basis of institutionalized identity rights—just like their own lodges, clubs, fraternities, churches, and political parties. Both sides wish everyone would go back to talking about the working class as if it were the middle class, so they can just forget class. Unsurprising is the neoliberal right’s opposition: they possibly resent the entry of new competitors. Either way, whatever the motivation and regardless of the partisan desires they may harbour, the critical insights can be made valuable. At the very least, I have to those who have helped to popularize the “New Victorianism” idea.

New Victorians: Helicopter Parents, Urban Gentry, Trauma Survivors

The term “New Victorian” is used to mean different things by different writers. One depicts the New Victorians as a particularly precious segment of the urban and upper middle-class, or just upper class—essentially, avid social climbers, with lots of status pretence, busily nesting in the brownstones of upscale neighbourhoods: “a New Vic can be a feminist and even a committed world-changer, but she also has to have a great job, superior husband, kids, and try to save society all at once”. They can even constitute a new landed gentry of sorts, with their increased interest in practicing “urban agriculture” (Ratner, 2007). Here the focus
is on New *Victorians* as a class type. The undisputed political representative of these New Victorians would have to be Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Focusing more on the New *Victorianism*, which looks at the phenomenon in terms of social relations and political positions, are those essays that deal with bourgeois feminism and the politics of sex and gender. Thus one writer opens with this:

“According to ourselves, modern Americans have cast off the ruffles, paternalism, and prudishness of the Victorians. We certainly wear less fabric on our bodies at any given time than they did. However, in at least one way our bosoms beat as one: our cultures are linked by the conviction that it is our job to make the world a better place by reforming the beliefs and behavior of the masses. One peculiar way in which this desire to improve the world manifests is in the treatment of select groups from within society”. (Mussmann, 2015)

In other ways, the New Victorianism effectively reproduces the Old Victorianism’s portrayals of women—but it expands the humanitarian object needing rescue and protection beyond women, and encapsulates all young adults as helpless children, while using children to boost the status of parents:

“In fact, the popular, romantic vision of femininity, as seen in Victorian literature, is that of a beautiful, shrinking violet who exemplifies virtue through her own inability to cope with other peoples’ vice. Exposure to evil routinely leads to the Victorian heroine’s collapse. If evil does not seduce her, it is likely to kill her through a severe attack of nerves. Modern society also cherishes its shrinking violets. The contemporary flowers in question are those individuals whom we do not yet deem adults. Children and adolescents are no longer required or allowed to labor alongside their parents. The modern schedule of school, sports, extracurricular activities, and media consumption is busy, of course; but these activities are not essential to survival. They can even be a way to turn one’s children into status symbols. A child born at the appropriate moment in his parents’ careers, dressed in suitably adorable clothes for Facebook photos, driven to correct educational activities, and admitted to a proper Ivy League school, is a child who demonstrates the genteel rank to which his parents belong”. (Mussmann, 2015)

From within this fold springs the “humanitarian” desire to intervene around the world: “A life that is full of newly-invented, crazily abundant material goods leaves a mark on the psyche. It feeds the need to justify ourselves and our existence in our own eyes. It is linked to our need to make the world a better
place….what happens when a segment of the population is thrust into a protective bubble so that society can believe in its power to save and reform the world[?]” (Mussmann, 2015).

Others instead portray a New Victorianism in terms of the imposition of regulations on interactions between the sexes—with an emphasis on protection and security. Writing about the “Neo-Victorianism on campus,” MacDonald argues that a “neo-Victorian ethos” has, in an ironic twist for Western feminism, by turning the males who primarily make up campus administrations into the guardians of female safety:

“campus feminists are reimporting selective portions of a traditional sexual code that they have long scorned….They are once again making males the guardians of female safety and are portraying females as fainting, helpless victims of the untrammeled male libido. They are demanding that college administrators write highly technical rules for sex and aggressively enforce them, 50 years after the proponents of sexual liberation insisted that college adults stop policing student sexual behavior”. (MacDonald, 2014).

Hewitt maintained that “fundamental aspects of the Victorian sexual regime persisted until the 1960s,” which would validate the idea that there is a New Victorianism today which has—intentionally or not—met up with and revived ideas that lingered from the Old Victorian period until 50 years ago (2006, p. 412).

Reframing the sites of normal female-male interaction in terms of “risk” seems like a domestication of globalized risk society. While it’s unknown if they have had a causal effect, the very least we can say is that regulations, surveillance, and perceptions of risk, correspond with a sharp decline in sexual activity among US teenagers, a dramatic reversal from recent decades. As Barone (2015) reported, “a Center for Disease Control survey showed that less than half of teenagers over 14 in 2013 have engaged in sexual intercourse, a sharp decline from 1988 — and a sharper decline among males than females”. He also finds a “Victorian aspect” to legalizing same-sex marriage, especially in arguments that marriage would help to “domesticate” homosexuals and render them less promiscuous and subject to greater “restriction and restraint” (Barone, 2015). Indeed, in Quebec where the institution of marriage has been widely repudiated, such that you find even sexagenarians still talking in teen terms of their “boyfriend” or “girlfriend,” there is a puzzlement that one can easily encounter about
why gays would want marriage, as if going back to a past that the Quebecois thought they had left behind. In Argentina, where marriage rates have plunged by 60% over the last 25 years, fake weddings are commercially produced as parties for people who enjoy the spectacle, food, drink, and dancing (see CBC Radio, 2016). It’s ambiguous how one can earnestly support marriage for gays in the name of equality, while rejecting the institution of marriage for oneself.

In dealing with the heightened perception of risk and harm, new speech codes are being instituted on campuses across the US, which added to the “disinvitation” of “controversial” speakers, the widening definition of “hate speech,” and calls for “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces,” would suggest fear of an impending catastrophe. According to some estimates, 217 American colleges and universities—including some of the most prestigious—have speech codes that “unambiguously impinge upon free speech” (Burleigh, 2016). A sense of anxiety, even panic, seems to have taken hold of some students on numerous campuses, with the liberal class yet again defending illiberal solutions, such as erecting barriers to free speech. “Bias Response Teams,” in language that evokes policing, are in operation on more than a hundred campuses and are ready to bring to swift justice those whose speech offends others (Snyder & Khalid, 2016). Beyond university campuses, the New York City Commission on Human Rights has resorted to fining people for not using the gender pronoun that an individual may prefer (Volokh, 2016)—this goes beyond regulated speech, and becomes compelled speech. The pronouns are almost incomprehensible inventions that are alien to mainstream speech, seemingly designed to meet the artificial needs of those who entertain more than 50 gender options (Oremus, 2014). The only people who can have so much time for such intricate self-fashioning must be active members of the leisure class. Even if using different methods, the ornate elaboration of personal identity seems as extensive among New Victorians as Old.

The dogma of protection has come home to roost—as Laura Kipnis wrote in a widely read article, that got her into trouble with the administration of her university (Northwestern): “The melodramatic imagination’s obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators is what’s shaping the conversation of the moment, to the detriment of those whose interests are supposedly being protected” (Kipnis, 2015a). Kipnis argues that when students are encouraged to regard themselves as “such exquisitely sensitive creatures,” with affectations of so
much “delicacy,” what is produced is a “climate of sanctimony about student vulnerability” that manufactures “helpless damsels”. She also argues that, “if you wanted to produce a pacified, cowering citizenry, this would be the method” (Kipnis, 2015a). Speaking on the issue of “trigger warnings” on course outlines and in classroom presentations, the American Association of University Professors issued a report that seems to concur with Kipnis’ pacification argument: “The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual” (quoted in Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

As if resolutely determined to prove Kipnis’ very points, students came forward claiming to be “terrified” by her essay and demanded “official condemnation” (Kipnis, 2015b). Scorched earth has become the new norm governing speech in North America and parts of Europe: *if I don’t like what you say, then you shouldn’t be allowed to make a living that permits you to say it*. People should be cast into internal exile, where maybe once they are reduced to itinerant street beggars will they be allowed the privilege to speak their minds—when nobody is likely to listen.

Ralph Nader (2016) has also come out against the new wave of what some call political correctness on campus:

“You see it on campuses—what is it called, trigger warnings? It’s gotten absurd. I mean, you repress people, you engage in anger, and what you do is turn people into skins that are blistered by moonbeams. Young men now are far too sensitive because they’ve never been in a draft. They’ve never had a sergeant say, ‘Hit the ground and do 50 push-ups and I don’t care if there’s mud there’”.

One might infer from Nader’s observation that investments in delicacy are implicitly a reaction against “working class culture” perceived as coarse, uncouth, impolite, and ignorant.

Finally, Jeannie Suk at Harvard University has pointed out the consequences of all of these impediments to teaching law on sexual violence, which an increasing number of students object to as triggering trauma. The amazing outcome is that a victim culture is disarming itself of one of its most used tools (Suk, 2014).
Against the Labouring Classes: Identity Politics in the New Victorian Age

The New Victorianism serves to not only divert politics into issues of morality and identity, it works to obfuscate the bases of increasing inequality. Focusing on the Democratic Party, and its abandonment of the working class over the past forty years, Adolph Reed Jr. (professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania) would appear to have seen from early on how these issues are linked—though he does not use the phrase “New Victorianism,” he describes it in other words. Speaking of Democrats and liberals in general, he wrote of,

“their capacity for high-minded fervor for the emptiest and sappiest platitudes; their tendencies to make a fetish of procedure over substance and to look for technical fixes to political problems; their ability to screen out the mounting carnage in the cities they inhabit as they seek pleasant venues for ingesting good coffee and scones; their propensity for aestheticizing other people’s oppression and calling that activism; their reflex to wring their hands and look constipated in the face of conflict; and, most of all, their spinelessness and undependability in crises”. (Reed, 1996)

Twenty years ago he criticized “their refusal to face up to the class realities of American politics” and how liberals “avoid any linkage of inequality with corporations’ use of public policy to drive down living standards and enhance their plunder”. Instead, when it comes to the marginalized within the US they opt for a maudlin “save-the-babies politics” that demonizes working-class parents, much the same way that the right-wing has done. He concluded that liberal politics are “motivated by the desire for proximity to the ruling class and a belief in the basic legitimacy of its power and prerogative. It is a politics which, despite all its idealist puffery and feigned nobility, will sell out any allies or egalitarian objectives in pursuit of gaining the Prince’s ear” (Reed, 1996).

Reed’s critique later expanded beyond the confines of the Democratic party, moving to include left activists and the labour movement, raising an issue that I recently touched upon when I wrote that, “it now seems clear that every single sector and shade of the US left has made some sort of peace with neoliberalism, with the basic structure of the status quo, from which their hopes hang even if by the thinnest of humanitarian, cosmopolitan and reformist threads” (Forte, 2016a). This is how Reed argued the point:
“the labor movement has been largely subdued, and social activists have made their peace with neoliberalism and adjusted their horizons accordingly. Within the women’s movement, goals have shifted from practical objectives such as comparable worth and universal child care in the 1980s to celebrating appointments of individual women to public office and challenging the corporate glass ceiling. Dominant figures in the antiwar movement have long since accepted the framework of American military interventionism. The movement for racial justice has shifted its focus from inequality to ‘disparity,’ while neatly evading any critique of the structures that produce inequality”. (Reed, 2014)

On Obama, Reed commented on how he is largely a figment of identity politics: “Obama is the pure product of this hollowed-out politics. He is a triumph of image and identity over content; indeed, he is the triumph of identity as content” (Reed, 2014). Just as Obama as a mere image was meant to perform a domestic counterinsurgency function—pacification—identity politics was meant to suffocate class divisions:

“The assertion of a fundamentally antagonistic history between labour and social movements, particularly those based on ascriptive identities like race, gender or sexual orientation, is a reflex in the discourse of the identitarian left fuelled by liberal stereotypes of the organized working class as definitively white, male and conservative. This political lore, despite having some basis in historical fact, has hardened into unexamined folk knowledge among many activists”. (Dudzic & Reed, 2015, p. 361)

We have now reached the astounding point where those supporting the working-class are seen as being, at best, closet racists. That is not the triumph of the New Victorians, rather it’s a sign of them desperately digging in their heels as their project begins to collapse under the weight of resentment, revolt, and even ridicule. What is a sign of the success of the New Victorians, however, is the extent to which “the left” has been emptied of meaning or practical force, edging it closer to becoming a fiction.

Understanding History and the New Victorianism

One of the persisting problems with speaking of an Old and New Victorianism, is the timing of the height of the phenomena. The older, British one marked a
confident period of economic and territorial expansion. The newer, American one comes also during a period of expanding and multiplying wars, but also with a sense of persistent and worsening crisis and insecurity at home. For now, I cannot go further with this problem, if it is a problem.

There are other key differences: since Old Victorian times, there has been a great decline of the illusion of certainty and order in nature; our understanding of nature has become one that increasingly sees it as messy and unpredictable (Hewitt, 2006, p. 418–419). Another major difference is that Victorian culture was not a consumer culture—there was a general awareness of scarcity, of limited luxuries of life, and there was a limited range of consumer goods (Hewitt, 2006, pp. 415–416).

On the other hand, I think the North American “New Victorianism” marks an actual decline in and of itself, and is thus quite distinct from Victorianism. Most of our politicians, journalists and academics could not survive a five-minute interview with one of their Victorian ancestors. To be blunt and entirely subjective, I think our Victorianism is a dumber version: less articulate, challenged when it comes to vocabulary and grammar, and more importantly, lacking sufficiently developed logical and analytical capacities. We seem to be especially plagued by a generalized problem: the inability to understand that wishful thinking is not analysis, that what we think the world ought to be cannot describe the world as it is.

One of the other issues that troubles me about drawing parallels between the present and the 19th century, is the risk of reinforcing the tendency to see the present, and the future, as a mere re-run of the past. The historicist mistake is to think that no new history is possible, that it really did terminate in the 19th century, the same century in which Hegel was proclaiming the end of history. The main advantage in thinking of “Victorianism” (old or new) is not to suggest that Western culture endlessly repeats itself, but how two culturally, ideologically, and technologically proximate empires share a similarity in decline, and how the New Victorianism marks not the height but the start of the dissolution of the New Imperialism. This seems to be especially the case as the latter begins to devour its own at home.

Another question has to do with how we measure periods, and how we treat periods (the arbitrary construction of analysts) as if they were facts. We thus risk treating time measurements as if they were social realities, and treat
chronology as if it were history. One way to deal with this problem is to see the 19th century as much longer in duration that we actually thought, with the discontinuities and changes not substantial enough to justify abrupt demarcations in time. In that case the Old Victorianism might represent the high point of hegemony, and the New Victorianism a point lower down the slope, as unresolved contradictions plunge us into a post-imperial, post-Western world. I doubt this will mean the end of all Western civilization and capitalism, just that they may serve less and less as the focus of a unitary global order. Again, this cannot be developed further for now.

We are also hampered by those who have written about empires and imperialism. Many who have written about the British empire, do not see imperialism continuing after the end of British colonialism—because they conflate imperialism with colonialism, when colonialism might instead be seen as one mode among many for achieving empire. On the other hand, there are those who view contemporary imperialism as an abrupt departure from the British, and reduce British imperialism to a single, stereotypical mode of colonization.

Also not addressed here is why Victorianism emerged as such. Why the emphases on trade, philanthropy, and good governance? I think this has to do in large part with the need for capital to expand. Pursuit of free trade requires standardization, undermining rivals through propaganda campaigns and policies of emancipation (anti-slavery then, anti-homophobia now). Such imperial “freedom” campaigns, which perform a service for capitalist growth, also bring in surrogates recruited through soft power and enchantment, even as horrible violence is unleashed. However, the risk here is that of arguing that all of this is purely, ultimately, or mostly the product of the determinations of capital. Capital, on its own, is a pile of inanimate junk (to paraphrase a colleague). Capital needs to interact with ideas, motivations, compulsions, and practice. But when, how, and why the ideas of liberalism took shape and gained ascendancy is a much bigger project and requires further research on my part.

Even with these difficulties and problems with Victorianism, it is a useful means of doing the following:

a) understanding how disparate parts of a social and cultural formation fit together, how they form durable patterns, and how they reinforce each other;
b) providing an historical basis for perceiving the contemporary culture of imperialism;

c) raising the question of cyclical history and how we might envision “what is coming next”; and,

d) shining a light on the historical and cultural origins of the ideas framing current political debates.

Notes

1 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_statues_of_Queen_Victoria
2 See: https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/

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