

Citation for published version:

Katrina Navickas, "Searching for the Material in Peter K. Andersson's 'How Civilized Were the Victorians?'"', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 22 (1): 99-104, December 2016.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2016.1261591>

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Searching for the Material in Peter K. Andersson's 'How Civilized Were the Victorians?'

Peter K. Andersson deliberately challenges complacency and established norms in Victorian studies in 'How Civilized Were the Victorians?'. The scholarly debate that followed online show how his bold call for a rethinking of disciplinary boundaries and methods mirror a vein of current thinking in Victorian studies. This response examines Andersson's thesis in relation to class, discourse and structure, particularly in relation to the working classes and future directions in approaches to nineteenth-century sources. It suggests that Victorian scholars can learn from labour geographers, who offer new models that highlight structural inequalities while maintaining a sensitivity to post-structural cultural understandings of gender, race and class.

Andersson begins by taking a critical shot at the dominance of two models – Norbert Elias's 'civilizing process' and Michel Foucault's 'oppression thesis' – in understanding nineteenth-century society and its sources. Applying Elias's civilizing process to the nineteenth century, scholars have argued that the Victorians sought respectability and essentially middle-class values, and this drive shaped such factors as crime and violence rates, and attitudes to blood sports and popular leisure. In effect, inhabitants of Britain in the nineteenth century continued the eighteenth-century Enlightenment obsession with 'politeness' and 'sensibility' as a set of social rules, though notably many Victorian studies do not consider this antecedent before 'their period'.¹ Predicating a stereotype of the uptight Victorian consequently allowed scholars of the Twentieth Century to show how the civilizing process gave way to a more informal, less

1. Peter K. Andersson, 'How Civilized Were the Victorians?' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20.4 (December 2015), 439–52; Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, first published 1939); Martin J. Wiener, 'The Victorian Criminalization of Men', in *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor and Rituals in Modern Europe and America*, ed. by Pieter Spierenburg (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), pp. 197–212. For an application of Elias to the eighteenth century, see Robert B. Shoemaker, 'The Decline of Public Insult in London, 1650–1800', *Past & Present*, 169 (November 2000), 97–131.

‘uptight’ mode of social rules.² Though he does not deny the importance of this model, Andersson suggests that viewing all nineteenth-century life through this lens distorts the way in which scholars understand the everyday lives and actions of the working classes in particular. In particular: ‘plebeian women were seldom given a voice in Victorian society; sadly the same goes for Victorian studies.’³ He then argues that when scholars do examine sources related to the working classes, they can fall prey to the second, and effectively counterpart, model to Elias: the oppression thesis, derived from Michel Foucault’s ideas about the growth of institutions and instruments of social control in the nineteenth century, notably the prison and the workhouse.⁴ Despite modern scholars’ search for agency among individuals, the working classes are always one step removed, as they are predominantly depicted through middle-class literary sources and ideas, and are regarded therefore as social norms and ideas transmitted downwards by elites.

I agree especially with Andersson’s critique of portrayals of some common tropes that seem to hold a particular attraction for Victorian scholars, including the development of modern policing, representations of prostitutes and the romantic ‘flâneur’ wandering around London and Paris. Romantic literary studies, for example, are infused with interpretations of the city derived from Foucault and Baudelaire, and they are fond of making historical actors engage in a *dérive* around the West End of London. As Barry Doyle has shrewdly identified in his review of urban history of this type, they offer a picture of a ‘new and unproblematically unified middle class remaking the city in their own form.’⁵ The nineteenth-century city is seen through bourgeois

2. John Pratt, *Punishment and Civilization: Penal Tolerance and Intolerance in Modern Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2002).

3. Andersson, ‘How Civilized Were the Victorians?’, p. 442.

4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); see Dennis Smith, “‘The Civilizing Process’” and “‘The History of Sexuality’”: Comparing Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault’, *Theory and Society*, 28.1 (1999), 79–100.

5. Barry Doyle, ‘Review of Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910* (Chicago, 2008)’, *Urban History*, 37.1 (May 2010), 109.

eyes, both of literary sources and of the historian. It is also metropolitan-centric, with a neglect of the realities of life in industrial towns and villages, as French industrialist Leon de Faucher realized immediately when he visited the slums of Manchester in 1844.⁶ Indeed, when cited, the accounts of de Faucher, and of his contemporary Friedrich Engels, are treated as flaneur's accounts, expressive of the gothic horror of the slum, rather than as critical sociological and economic analyses on the effects of unbridled urban speculation and industrial capitalism and the product of proletarianization.⁷

Discussing the influence of Elias and Foucault only marks Andersson's introduction to the larger issue of the current state of 'Victorian Studies'. His main critique is its dominance by literary studies and cultural history. He notes that Victorianists remain wedded to literary sources and 'discursive forms of "gender" or "class" as opposed to "women" and "workers"'. Hence he challenges how Victorian scholars present the working class in their research, stating:

My point is not that the lower classes are neglected in Victorian research. The problem is rather scholars' inability to look beyond discourse and the tendency to view 'Victorian Studies' as an exclusively literary discipline, while research on everyday life and non-elites tends to be pigeonholed in the disciplines of labour history or social history, thus cultivating a scholarly division.⁸

Text and discourse become the main source and approach to studying the nineteenth century, and these isolate literary studies in particular from history, and prevent a genuinely interdisciplinary way of understanding the era.

6. Leon de Faucher, *Manchester in 1844: its Present Condition and Future Prospects, Translated from the French by a Member of Manchester Athenaeum* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co, 1844).

7. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Leipzig, 1845, translated by Florence Kelly, London: William Reeves, 1888); Sharon Meagher, 'Philosophy in the Streets: Walking the City with Engels and de Certeau', *City*, 11.1 (April 2007), 7–20; see however Aruna Krishnamurthy, 'More than Abstract Knowledge: Friedrich Engels in Industrial Manchester', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28.2 (2000), 427–48.

8. Andersson, 'How Civilized Were the Victorians?', p. 445.

Why has this shift in sources and methods occurred, and is it a problem? In historical studies at least, the older grand narratives of Whiggish progress or Marxist models of class formation have been overtaken and rendered out-dated by postmodernist literary and historical study and the rise of cultural history as a separate discipline.⁹ In literary studies, Romanticism and the fall-out of ‘new historicism’ has left a legacy of the primacy of text and representation. In one sense, therefore, Andersson makes a similar challenge to that in Peter Mandler’s provocative introduction to the first issue of the *Cultural and Social History* journal, ‘The Problem with Cultural History’, in 2004. Mandler criticized the postmodernist methods that consumed much of historical and literary studies in the 1990s, in which culture and text were presented as pre-eminent sources and investigations into the experience of class became subsumed among studies of representations of other forms of identity.¹⁰ Andersson’s comment also brings to mind Emma Griffin’s widely-lauded study of over 350 working-class autobiographies, *Liberty’s Dawn: a People’s History of the Industrial Revolution*, which attempts to break this divide.¹¹ Peter Gurney has criticized Griffin’s book for neglecting the politics of class conflict, and also for presuming that literary scholars have treated ‘working-class autobiographies “as a form of literature, even fiction”, rather than straightforward reflections of historical reality, “freely-narrated”’.¹²

9. Katrina Navickas, ‘What Happened to Class? New Histories of Labour and Collective Action in Britain’, *Social History*, 36.2 (2011), 192–204.

10. Peter Mandler, ‘The Problem with Cultural History’, *Cultural and Social History*, 1.1 (2004), 94–117. See also the retort by Colin Jones, ‘Peter Mandler’s “Problem with Cultural History” or is Playtime Over?’, *Cultural and Social History*, 1.2 (2004), 209–15.

11. Emma Griffin, *Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

12. Peter Gurney, ‘Review of *Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the Industrial Revolution*, by Emma Griffin’, *History*, 99: 337 (October 2014), 704, citing Griffin, *Liberty’s Dawn*, pp. 9–10. See also the review by John Cucich in *Victorian Studies*, 57.1 (Autumn 2014), 120–22.

Unlike Mandler's critique of cultural history, however, Andersson does not reject the value of literary and cultural sources. Rather, he argues that Victorian scholars should examine a much wider range of source and not rely solely on text. He focuses on an alternative source, photography, arguing that the study of visual images can 'stimulate a move away from representational sources and cultures of restraint and discipline.'¹³ In particular, he examines body language in photographs of women in nineteenth-century Sweden, which show the physicality and cross-class contact that literary sources neglect to identify.

The nineteenth century was indeed far from solely 'civilizing' but rather an era of immense social, economic and political change that affected all inhabitants of Western Europe in myriad ways. Victorianists should not shy away from using or discussing 'class' and indeed 'structure' as a term. Cultural representations and literary discourses may have represented unrest and political change, and shaped such phenomena as 'the making of the English working class', but they are not the whole story; there is still a need to understand of the material structures that underpinned these changes. This is where I share Andersson's call to counter the dominance of literary sources and approaches in Victorian studies. But his chosen focus, body language in photographs, can only be one approach. I argue for a much wider interdisciplinarity that includes geography within studies of Victorian life.

In emphasizing perspective and codes of conduct, Andersson skips over the issue of *experience*. In Hegelian terms, experience is the counter-part to representation. Understanding experience serves to highlight the structural and material conditions that shape and were shaped by those who lived in and through them. Historians of the twentieth century perhaps are more conscious of experience, not least because of the wider and more immediate types of sources available to them. Selina Todd, for example, has explored the primacy of experience in shaping working-class identity and life in twentieth-century Britain. She takes her cues from E.P. Thompson, the foremost exponent of a cultural understanding of Marxist class relations in his

13. Andersson, 'How Civilized Were the Victorians?', p. 445.

studies of early nineteenth-century popular politics and society.¹⁴ In this model, class is relative to social groups' positions in social relations in specific economic circumstances and therefore situated in particular moments in time. Class is therefore relative and changing over time, not just in relation to other classes but also dependent on groups' experience of previous economic circumstances, on a desire for autonomy or stability during periods of economic distress, and on economic and political policies of the government.¹⁵

For finding interdisciplinary and material(ist) perspectives, I turn to human geography. Labour geography in particular is a vibrant field, using a wider range of sources and records of events and actions by the working classes than simply representations of them. In particular, the study of marginal, domestic and migrant workers is integral to definitions of the working class, whereas traditional labour history has generally focused on skilled white male workers. Doreen Massey's pioneering work demonstrated the spatial divisions of labour, created by the uneven development of capitalism across the globe, which was in turn shaped by social and political as well as economic imperatives. She then examined the ways in which space functions as a series of mutable and continually changing networks, providing junctures for collective action.¹⁶ Labour geography therefore situates the agency of workers and their collective organizations within a multiscalar space, connecting the real experience of local struggles to national and global ideas and movements. It foregrounds issues of identity and migration and stresses the importance of material landscapes as products of the materialist structures that shape labour

14. Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910–2010* (London: John Murray, 2014); Selina Todd, 'Class, Experience and Britain's Twentieth Century', *Social History*, 39.4 (2014), 489–508, (p.490).

15. Note also the more theoretical approach taken by David Carr, *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

16. Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1984; 2nd edition, 1995).

conflict in many forms.¹⁷ David Featherstone's work, for example, has shown the connections between the local and the global in the networks of the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s, among other political and social movements.¹⁸ I encourage Victorian scholars to include geographical approaches in their study of the era as a way of understanding the material and economic structures that shaped the actors in the narratives portrayed by literary sources.

Andersson's focus on body language would further benefit from an attention to the methods of geographers who study the ways in which bodies shape space and vice versa. Scholars of 'embodied geographies' consider the performativity of the person within space, a crucial aspect of Andersson's understanding of how the individuals in his photographic sources contested social rules about etiquette and class norms. Embodied geographies challenge expected norms of how gendered and racialized bodies are produced, exploited and punished. Geographers of medicine and disability also seek to understand norms and constraints on bodily ability in space. Reecia Orzeck has argued that although these ways of understanding the intersectionality of bodies in space is essentially post-structuralist, scholars can apply historical materialism to its study by considering how the spaces in which bodies performed were shaped and created by capitalist modes of production.¹⁹

17. Neil M. Coe, 'Geographies of Production III: Making Space for Labour', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37.2 (April 2012), 272.

18. David Featherstone, *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: the Making of Counter-Global Networks* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); David Featherstone, 'Contested Relationalities of Political Activism: the Democratic Spatial Practices of the London Corresponding Society', *Cultural Dynamics*, 22.2 (July 2010), 87–104; David Featherstone and Paul Griffin, 'Spatial Relations, Histories from Below and the Makings of Agency: Reflections on *The Making of the English Working Class at 50*', *Progress in Human Geography*, 40.3 (June 2016), 375–93.

19. Reecia Orzeck, 'What Does Not Kill You: Historical Materialism and the Body', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25.3 (June 2007), 496–517. See Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose, 'Taking Butler Elsewhere: Performativities, Spatialities and Subjectivities', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18.4 (August 2000), 433–452; Robyn Longhurst, 'Geography and the Body', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2.1 (1995), 97–105.

Victorian studies has tended to seek the individual voice and the collective representation in nineteenth-century society without an accompanying attention to the material structures that shaped or restricted the opportunities for those voices to be expressed. Representation in cultural sources was vital, but as Andersson's article has shown, they did not form the whole picture, often being constructed by bourgeois or dominant elites. I therefore argue that Victorian scholars can learn from labour geographers in considering structures as relative and intersectional, rather than fixed and solely economic, and should always consider the materiality of class and everyday life.

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