Week 12 Lecture 2: The Industrial Age

As we move into the late 18th and 19th centuries, we encounter a profound shift in human existence, as great as the ancient shift from hunter-gather to agrarian (agricultural-based) cultures. This time, we move from agrarian cultures to industrialized cultures, and every single aspect of human existence will be altered, and the change will spread over the entire globe.  And it started in Britain.

Why Britain?  Because of the 'perfect storm' of circumstances that made the time right.  It had the available natural resources -- in its ground were the metals and coal required for industry; it had the right economic climate and the stability of being an island nation that could concentrate its time and energy on internal growth rather than foreign wars; and it had a burgeoning population.  And so Britain went from an agragrian, feudal society to an industrial and urban one with a large new poor class and a rising middle class, in a relatively short period of time.

This meant that it had to deal with a large population in terrible poverty, people who had poured into the cities from the countryside, eking out an existence by working in factories.  Our current debates about the size and role of government and its responsibility to those in need were born in this time, as were modern-day concepts of gender roles.   Families once worked together on farms; now there were two work spheres -- business and domestic -- and males were relegated to one, which was valued economically, and women to the other, which was not.  This would have profound implications for equal rights.

Railroads almost overnight connected distant places, moving people and freight. (A member of Parliament, sent to dedicate the Liverpool-Manchester line, was seriously injured by the train, which then transported him to the hospital, where he died. I am not making this up.)

This painting is *The Old Hetton Colliery*(1840).   It shows a coal mine in the north of England, one of a great many in that time.  Coal had been dug out of the ground since before the ancient Roman era, to warm dwellings and later to work iron; but with the advent of the Industrial Age, coal was essential to process the great amounts of iron needed for machinery, and power the steam locomotives to transport goods.  How does this painting comment on the presence of the coal mines, in its choice of colors, its composition, its mood?

The painting is dominated by smokestacks, factory buildings, and machinery that even in the night seem to be giving off vapors and steam.  A ground fire illuminates the area.  Nature is evident in the distant sky, and the distant, remote moon which seems to peek through the clouds at the scene.  The human figures and the dog are small and insignificant, passing by the dark, grim scene illuminated by an unnatural fire that could be Hell itself, breaking through the crust of the earth.  The natural colors of the night sky pale in contrast to the coal fire.  The infernal engines of industry dominate this scene; nature and humanity occupy secondary spaces.

This work was painted in 1840, two years before Parliament passed the Mines and Colliery Act which prohibited women and boys under the age of ten from working underground in the coal mines.  (Before the Act, children as young as four or five sat for long hours underground, opening and closing air vents; if they survived to get older, they would then begin pushing/pulling wagons of coal underground.)  It is a scene couldn't be a greater contrast to the green, pastoral, agrarian life that was disappearing in England.

It is impossible to overstate how industrialization changed individual lives, the economic and political structure of nations, their relationship to other countries, and the ecology of the entire planet.  From this point forward, we will see artists questioning and challenging the effects of industrialization and capitalism.

Two influential philosophers of the 19th century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, also raised questions about industrialization and capitalism. For understandable reasons relating to the rise of the superpowers and the Cold War, many Americans recoil at the mention of Marx's name.  He has been connected for so long to so many myths, inaccuracies and distorted views that it can be difficult to get back to some basic facts about him as one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century.  He watched the rise of the industrial system and capitalism, and actually had some very intelligent things to say about them --  and some surprisingly accurate predictions. Marx maintained that the success of capitalism depends upon making us believe we need more and more material possessions and that money can solve all our problems. He believed that capitalism, having created artificial needs for all sorts of unnecessary items, thus creates a feeling of poverty and alienation in people, and sets up a cycle in which, instead of relying on true human contacts and the satisfaction of true needs, we work harder in meaningless jobs to get more money to buy more things we don't really need and which ultimately do not truly satisfy us. He condemned this cycle as dehumanizing and destructive.  Marx warned that capitalism would eventually disenfranchise the middle class, lead to the proliferation of monopolies, and create a complex system that would eventually collapse under its own weight.

The newly-industrialized British wrestled with the question of of poverty in the newly-industrialized cities. The utilitarian views of Jeremy Bentham were seen as a strong force behind the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which established a system of workhouses that were meant to be not so much deliberately inhumane (though they certainly were!) as â€œunpleasant,â€ so that the poor would try to avoid being sent to them.  Bentham's ideas about morality and law were radical for the time and yet obviously struck a chord with many Victorians at a time when England's cities were overwhelmed by the sheer number of destitute and working poor.  Many of Charles Dickens' novels take aim at the Benthamites' view.

Interesting note: Jeremy Bentham's body remains on display at the University College London, in what he described as his "auto-icon."  The head is wax.

  Is this creepy, or what?

A big change in art was brought about by a group of French artists who wanted their art to lead the way into a social renewal, after the revolutions we learned about in the last chapter.   Periods of darkness and destruction open the way for a new chance, and a new vision, and out of that spirit, Impressionism was born.  It remains one of the most beloved styles of painting today.  Many of us are strongly drawn to the harmonious, lovely, fresh, and quietly joyful character of these works.

In a newly-industrialized world that seemed to move faster and faster, the Impressionists succeeded in capturing single radiant moments.   At a time when human society was in revolution and turmoil, they found peace and comfort away from political contests and financial wrangling.  Industry was changing every aspect of life, but the Impressionist painters found solace in nature's dependable rhythms of sunlight and the seasons.  They took their work out of the studio and into the fresh air, and they studied the effect of natural light on their subjects.  They went back to basics in a sense, trying to see in a new way that focused on color.  They abandoned the traditional techniques that captured realistic detail with invisible brushstrokes.  Here's Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1874) that gave the movement its name.

And here's a detail showing the brushstrokes from *Impression Sunrise*:

You can see that there is no attempt to blend the brushstrokes of green and orange into the background; the viewer's eye will do that.  To many critics of the time, the work of the Impressionists looked unfinished, crude, unrealistic, and unskilled.  But these new artists didn't care -- they were in passionate search of a new truth in nature and particularly in light itself.

The Impressionists were helped in this endeavor by the invention of paint tubes they could easily carry outside, and the development of bright new synthetic pigments.  The result is a new way of looking at the landscape with the focus on light and color, and a celebration of the moment and spontaneous beauty.  Though their work was not well-received by traditionalist critics, it paved the way for greater experimentation that would culminate in the true birth of modern art.