
Pamela Gilbert explores the discursive terrain of citizenship in Victorian England between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, utilising a rich variety of sources to show how one’s fitness for citizenship during this period was increasingly conceptualized with reference to ideas of healthfulness and disease. Gilbert adroitly traces the shift away from a conception of citizenship in which property ownership – itself a guarantor of one’s independence, rationality and civic capacity – functioned as the sole and sufficient prerequisite for the political rights of citizenship. During a period of British history in which demands were increasingly made for an extension of the franchise to classes previously excluded, a new set of ideas and a new vocabulary were necessary to determine how those previously excluded might prove their fitness for citizenship.

Gilbert traces this discursive transition in three sections. Each section is concerned with a different set of documentary sources, all linking the observance of sanitary principles and commitment to hygienic precepts with those qualities of self-regulation, independence, rationality and civic morality traditionally associated with citizenship. In the first section, parliamentary debates on fitness for the franchise are considered, in the second, various sanitary and housing publications are assessed, and in the final section, Gilbert provides a compelling literary analysis of various novels of the period, showing how central ideas and images of the self-contained body were to social narratives in the novels of Dickens, Eliot, Disraeli, and Oliphant.

Gilbert’s focus on the links between the healthy, rationally managed body and civic capacity will be familiar to historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century population health in Europe and America, as well as to scholars interested in liberal subject formation, that branch of inquiry that seeks to understand the techniques and processes by which liberal subjects are invested with the knowledge and capacities to shape their conduct and desires in rational ways. In the first section of her work, Gilbert explores the political and socio-economic context in which these links between health and fitness for citizenship were articulated (expansion of the franchise), the expertise that gave this conception of civico-corporeal fitness its authority (sanitarians such as Edwin Chadwick), and the various referents – pauperism, disease, the grotesque – that were used to give meaning to a conception of fitness by exploring its antithesis.

In the second section, Gilbert moves beyond the ideational development of this discourse, and explores some of the programs, techniques and strategies that were mobilized to effect improvements in population health. Gilbert is primarily concerned here with attempts to reform the domestic spaces of the working class through various educational initiatives. The aim of these projects was to instruct and recalibrate working class conceptions of domesticity and the management of the household that would both improve health and signal fitness for citizenship through self-regulation. This, as with Gilbert’s work generally, is insightful and skillfully done.

Gilbert’s major contribution, and one that will be welcomed by many historians, is her historiography and exploration of the development of the ‘social sphere’ in nineteenth-century Britain, an exploration that is absent, as Gilbert correctly points out, from much historical scholarship on the period. In tracking the emergence of the social, Gilbert considers the conceptual orientations of Habermas, Foucault, Mary Poovey, and Nikolas Rose, using insights from each to show how the social – that ‘domain of society in which the boundaries of the public and private were policed’ (p.68) – was produced and how it functioned in the management of domestic and population health.
The *Citizen’s Body* is ambitious in its scope and should be an invaluable addition to the bookshelves of those working in the history of population health. Best of all, the scope of Gilbert’s study – desire, health, citizenship, and the social in Victorian England – leaves a great deal of room for other scholars to enter the field and make use of her excellent analysis.

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