

Unit 12: Video 1 Transcript

Q4: What happened in terms of state formation during the 19th century?

A: State formation was a very widespread process in the middle of the 19th century particularly. Many areas of life were affected increasingly by the state, and many more people came to understand that there was a state in charge, and that there were certain expectations of them. And they came to accept certain values that the state encouraged. This happened partly through the rise of institutions that the state supported and in many cases pressed for.

We think, I guess, of a number of social reform institutions that were established by the state in the 19th century. For instance, penitentiaries were built for the first time in the 1830s to deal with serious criminals, at least those who hadn't been hanged. And the hope, those reformers who urged that huge amounts of public money, tax dollars, go to the support of the building of a penitentiary, for instance at Kingston, you know, Ontario, Upper Canada then. They thought that this was a very useful way to spend money so that crime could eventually be eradicated by this symbol of this great prison, and that prisoners could be thoroughly reformed. They could be taught the habits of industry to be industrious and hardworking, and when they were released they'd be good citizens and good producers. They were also expected to be penitent in a penitentiary, to reflect on their sins, to make use of the bible and to reform morally. And so this was an institution that was going to eradicate a major social problem, even before it really became one. Because crime rates weren't actually all that high, even though the state was willing to put all this money into prison building and prison reform.

Other institutions were built, too. For those with an unbalanced mind, the lunatics, there was the asylum, again, built in the mid-19th century in a number of places including here in Toronto. And the idea was that the state had the answers to this problem too. People who were unbalanced and causing social problems, and social concerns as a result, and were a burden on their family might be put in an institution where they could learn new behaviours, be taught new behaviours. And eventually be released and be, again, proper members of society, good citizens.

The biggest institutional reform of the mid-19th century involved education. And the development of a state-supported school system or, in fact, a number of state-supported school systems. Early in the 19th century, most children didn't go to school. They learned what they needed to learn on the farm or around the family workshop or business. Only the wealthy were provided with tutors, but that was done privately. Increasingly over time as a middle class developed, there were people who tried to educate their children in private schools. And many middle class children did attend schools where they had to pay tuition. The state wasn't involved with any of this kind of education at all. But there were problems that developed, and there were advocates of school reform. Some school reformers, Egerton Ryerson is perhaps the most famous in Canadian history here in Ontario, advocated the creation of a school system with—where the state would provide buildings, and educate the teachers and certify them, and inspect the schools, and the children would be provided with a curriculum, grades would be set up. A much more structured form of schooling that would last much longer and be applied to many more children. The school system also developed, not just because there were advocates saying it was a good idea: a good idea that would make children better behaved, that would make them more industrious, that would make them good citizens, that would make them avoid crime. And it would help us avoid political unrest because they would learn the values of a state system, a culture that the state was promoting: stability, social order. Middle class parents were also concerned about schooling, as their private venture schools often went bankrupt, or teachers disappeared, and they couldn't educate their children efficiently or effectively. And so they began to look to the state to help them provide schooling for their own children. And that was a major impetus to the creation of a state-run school system. Middle class parents were influential in their societies, politically powerful, and they persuaded the state that it should expand and provide them with the educational services they needed for their children. The state also grew in the educational sphere from the bottom-up, from ordinary people saying, you know, we need something. Society's changing, particularly as industrialization took place people started to think that maybe they needed more schooling, formal education, than in the past. And they looked hopefully to schooling as a way forward for them.

They also wanted help to build a centralized system. We often think that the state simply imposed this on the people from the top down, but in fact, many people in the local areas found all kinds of problems in trying to run their schools, even the state-funded schools, without a system of rules. They would argue about where the school would be located. How were they supposed to sort out the location of a school? Well, they wanted rules that would help them decide how meetings were to be held, who got a say in those meetings. And that would help them avoid the kinds of very intense local conflicts that were troubling them.

As a result, a state system was built, a bureaucracy created at the centre, at the top, that then lasted for many decades and maybe endlessly, in fact, establishing rules and ways of doing things.