

Paper 1: A Level sample answer with comments

Section B

How significant was population growth in causing social change between 1625 and 1688?

Strong student answer

Society changed in a number of ways between 1625 and 1688. The growth of poverty, a changing class system, new ideas and changing gender roles all had an impact on social change at some point in the period. It is clear that population growth was an important determining factor in driving at least some of this change. The population of Britain had grown steadily since the 14th century, and this put new pressures on society that had not been seen before. Other factors can be seen as responsible for social change in these years, including the decline of the aristocracy. In their place, a thriving gentry and merchant class were able to flourish and take advantage of the new economic conditions that were present in the 17th century. As well as this, the growth of radical ideas in philosophy, science and religion helped to change society to an extent.

The population of England doubled in the 100 years before 1625, from around 2.5 million to over 5 million. The populations of Scotland and Ireland also went up, but not at the same rate. This impacted on social change in a number of ways, but nowhere more clearly than in towns. In 1600, there were eight towns with a population over 5,000, and this had increased to over 30 in 1700. This naturally changed society as towns provided different employment opportunities, resulting in those employed in agriculture declining from 67% of the population in 1600 to 56% in 1700. One industry that did particularly well was the cloth industry and, as the 'new draperies' from the Low Countries started to be produced in England, people's working lives changed. Despite these changes, the historian Barry Coward has argued that towns did not grow any more than is to be expected, and people's lives changed very little in these years.

Population growth undoubtedly had an impact on levels of poverty, in both towns and the countryside. By the middle of the century, two-thirds of the urban population lived near the poverty line, and between 1600 and 1650 inflation was around 4%. This outstripped wage rises, resulting in a decline in living conditions for some. Population growth led to overcrowding and competition for jobs in towns, and in the countryside, two-fifths of the rural poor had to work as domestic servants. It has been estimated that one-third of the population of rural villages in any given decade had to leave to find work, such was the competition for jobs. It is therefore clear that population growth impacted on social change, and the government were acutely aware of this. The existing Poor Relief legislation that had been passed in 1601 was modified in 1662, as vagrants were becoming a serious problem. This second Act restricted the movement of vagrants, and gave a definition of what constituted 'poor' for the first time, thus showing that the government was acutely aware of the changes that had taken place in the conditions of the poor.

The fortunes of the aristocracy were in decline between 1625 and 1688, and this resulted in some changes to the structure of society. Since Elizabeth's time, the aristocracy had been in decline, partly due to inflation, and partly due to the fact that much of the wealth of the aristocracy was tied up in assets they could not make a profit from, such as their property. As the aristocracy declined, the gentry class were able to flourish. The number of gentry increased by 300% between 1550 and 1650, and some of them even became richer than the aristocracy. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper has claimed that 'office rather than land' was the basis of their success, and they were able to hold important positions within government and the admiralty. As the economy improved, particularly in the second half of the century, there was an increase in the number of merchants. Many were based in London, and the most successful were given

This is a strong introduction that sets out what is going to be addressed in the essay, and emphasises the importance of population growth as a factor. It introduced a number of factors that will be discussed.

Relevant statistics are used to create a convincing argument, although more analysis of these could take place.

The impact of population growth is addressed again in this paragraph to show the impact it had on poverty and factual information is used well to relate this argument to the demands of the question.

A strong paragraph on the decline of the aristocracy, and rise of the gentry and merchant classes. Sound evidence is used and a link is made to the previous factor of population growth.

knighthoods for their service, which were previously only awarded through family connections. The Navigation Act of 1651 strengthened the power of the merchants, as British ships were guaranteed to be used in the transportation of British goods. More gentry and merchants meant there was more of a demand for those that were employed in providing services for them. In London in particular, more lawyers, doctors and architects were needed. The decline in the aristocracy and increase in the merchant class had little impact on the lower orders, and at the bottom of society it can be argued that very little changed. 90% of those accepted to the Inns of Court were still the sons of the gentry and nobility, and the sheer number of the poor (26,000 were arrested for vagrancy in the 1630s) shows that radical social change did not happen. This factor can be linked to population growth, because the gentry appear to be the class that benefitted most obviously from the increase in poverty driven by population pressures.

The growth of radical political and religious ideas also encouraged social change. The role of women changed in some social circles, as Puritanism became more popular. Traditional religious teaching stated that women should have a traditional role in the home. Wealthy women had more independence, and the daughters of the gentry would often be literate. There are a number of examples of women running the estates of soldiers fighting in the Civil War, and 6,000 women petitioned parliament for peace in 1643. After the First Civil War, there seemed to be the prospect of some change when radical ideas became more popular. The Levellers advocated giving some rights to women (though not the vote), and 10,000 Leveller women petitioned for John Lilburne's release in 1649. The Diggers went as far as to advocate female suffrage in the middle of the century, although their support was not widespread and they were limited by the Commonwealth. Despite this, the role of women changed little. The Adultery Act passed under the Commonwealth imposed the death penalty on women for adultery, although women were treated better in the North American Colonies. The group that had the most success in promoting the rights of women was the Quakers, who allowed girls to be educated in four of the 15 schools they opened before 1671.

Radical social change was promised by groups like the Levellers, who wanted a fairer and more just society. The Levellers wanted new elections under universal male suffrage, and wanted to abolish the House of Lords. Between 1649 and 1653, the radical groups were crushed and again the only group that had any long-term success was the Quakers, who had 35,000 members in the 1660s. Social attitudes were ultimately changed by the rise in the rational scientific method, first promoted by Francis Bacon. Bacon, and later John Locke, studied science and philosophy through empiricism and observation. This would eventually have an impact on social attitudes, but this was not until after the Glorious Revolution.

In conclusion, population growth had a knock-on effect on a number of changes between 1625 and 1688. The growth of poverty and success of the gentry clearly widened the gap between rich and poor, but it is debatable whether this was caused solely by population growth. The impact of radical ideas was limited because throughout much of the period these ideas were outlawed. The most important reason for social change appears to come from the changing class system, in particular the decline in the aristocracy. If this had not happened, the old social fabric would not have changed, and the Civil War and ensuing radical events would not have happened.

Radical political ideas are linked well to social change, and both the successes and failures of this are addressed. The discussion of the scientific revolution is brief and could be expanded further.

A strong conclusion that weighs up the factors that have been discussed in the essay and comes to a solid conclusion.

Verdict

This is a strong response because:

- the answer considers a number of relevant factors and evaluates them well and there is a sustained analysis of the key features of the period
- accurate and appropriate evidence is used throughout

- links are made between factors and the conclusion comes to a reasoned judgement
- the answer is well organised and follows a clear, logical structure.