

# Trust Among Strangers: Securing British Modernity by way of friendly society, '1780s-1870s.

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## Trust Among Strangers: Securing British Modernity ` by way of friendly society, ' 1780s - 1870s

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Main Content

Metrics

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Abstract

This dissertation examines friendly societies and the role they played in the development of social trust and cooperation in nineteenth century Britain. In doing so my work fundamentally repositions friendly societies within the social history of modern Britain. Previous histories have relied on the functional similarities between nineteenth century friendly societies and early modern craft guilds, producing narratives that situate friendly societies in the history of working-class formation. My work looks instead to the early seventeenth century cultural roots of the concept of friendly society. Examining the ways in which the concept of friendly society was adapted to provide justifications for new kinds of social relationships from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth, I demonstrate that friendly societies gave the reformers thinking through--and the laborers working through--the great changes of their day a new basis or model for social cooperation.

Specifically, friendly societies facilitated two types of relationships that had become especially problematic in a modernizing society: relationships between new kinds of social classes and relationships between strangers. In the context of the late eighteenth century debates on the poor laws, friendly societies helped reformers to imagine a new system of welfare where reciprocity would be based on the shared social risks posed by poverty. Configuring friendly societies such that each contributed according to ability and received according to liability, reformers found a socially meaningful way of integrating the poor into British society. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, national friendly societies, like the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, worked to adapt their friendly society practices so that members who were strangers to each other could nevertheless trust each other. Faced with the dilemma of providing mutual aid to migrating members from across Britain, the Odd Fellows overcame problems of distrust by ritualistically transforming their members into brothers, and the Order into a brotherhood. In the 1850s, the Odd Fellows reinforced those relationships with a combination of benevolence and actuarial science--and in the process taught members how to trust in numbers as well.

By focusing on the cooperative possibilities inherent in the concept of friendly society and the ways in which contemporaries adapted the concept to meet new contingencies, this dissertation brings a new perspective to the history of friendly societies, and with it, a new perspective on the emergence of modern forms of social trust more broadly.

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