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The cost of a British Obsession

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Foreword by Rt Hon Sir Richard Marsh

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Foreword

by Rt. Hon., Sir Richard Marsh

My father was an unemployed foundry worker, I went to a State school, and started work in a factory at fourteen years of age. Given these impeccable credentials am I "working class"? I have inherited nothing from my family apart from a large nose and protruding ears, and I have to work to earn the money to pay my mortgage. If anyone is "working class", then on the definition that the term working class refers to those people who have to work for a living, I am clearly included. But on that definition, so is almost everyone I know!

This is the extraordinary thing about the British preoccupation with class. It is a peculiarly British obsession, and in modern Britain it is a near total irrelevance.

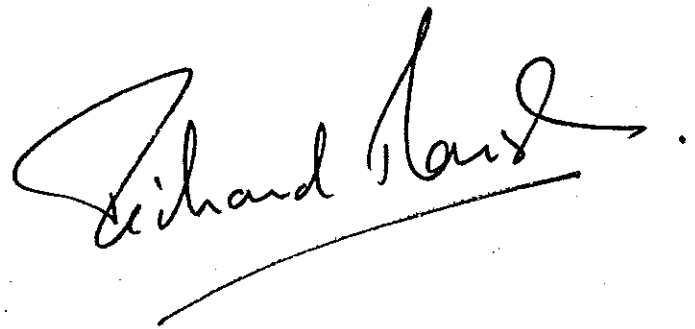
Mr Foot and Mr Wedgwood Benn are the products of classic British upper class backgrounds, complete with titled parents and public school educations, yet it would be absurd to suggest that this fact adds to, or subtracts from, their value to the community.

The fact is that in Britain in 1978, most of the "bosses" are salaried managers, who own little apart from the homes in which they live, and those usually on mortgages.

This obsession with class is not confined to the extreme left. The portrayal of manual workers as a vicious tribe of *Untermenschen*, living extravagantly in heavily subsidised council houses, on enormous handouts from the Social Security office, while their young pause in a continuous orgy of pre-marital sex and drug taking only long enough to sharpen their flick knives on the way to the local comprehensive school, is only a slight exaggeration of the nonsence talked by some people on the right of the political spectrum. It would not matter if this obsession with an out-dated concept of class were merely another amusing British excentricity, but, unfortunately, the practical effects are very damaging indeed.

Britain is a surprisingly stable and tolerant society. Even at the height of its popularity the British Communist Party has never succeeded in attracting enough members to fill a medium sized football ground, while the extreme right, despite periods of high unemployment and double figure inflation, has never posed a serious threat to the British political system. The fact is that there is very little popular demand for fundamental change in this country, and the natural area of consensus is very wide indeed. But as the activists in the Labour Party have become more and more dominated by people who are striving to achieve fundamental changes in the political and social system, so it has concentrated more and more on highlighting and exaggerating class differences to a point where much of its attitude to industry and commerce owes more to the politics of envy than the realities of the nation's economic needs.

Throughout the ages politicians of all colours have frequently sought to deflect attention from their own problems by deliberately whipping up hostility towards some particular scapegoat, but consciously to seek to divide our country into two hostile groups at a time when the living standards of the entire nation are seriously threatened by our inability to compete in the modern industrial world is lunacy. As Professor Bauer demonstrates, we are all workers now, and the economic success or failure of Britain in the coming years will affect all of our people whether they work on the shop floor or in the board room.



Class on the Brain: The cost of a British obsession

Introduction

It has become part of contemporary political folklore that a restrictive and divisive class system, almost a caste system, is the bane of this country. The system is supposed to be a major barrier to economic progress in Britain and also a significant source of justified social discontent. This is untrue.

I shall, first, summarize the widely accepted opinion about class in Britain; second show that it is misconceived; and finally suggest that the widespread acceptance of the misconceptions has led to harsh restrictions on mobility and freedom and threatens further and even more drastic restrictions.

My central contention is that the established but erroneous view on class in Britain mistakes a differentiated but open society for a closed or even caste society, that is one in which occupation depends on the class into which one was born.

The Standard Cliché

Herr Schmidt, the West German Chancellor, hardly an irresponsible agitator or extremist, provided a little while ago a crisp and unqualified summary formulation of received opinion on the subject of class. He was on an official visit in London in December 1975 when the pound was weak and the balance of payments in heavy deficit. He was reported in the *Financial Times* as saying:

> As long as you maintain that damned class ridden society of yours you will never get out of your mess.[1]

And indeed this is what foreigners are told all the time by the British intelligentsia. Thus the *Financial Times* staff writer, who quoted Herr Schmidt approvingly, went on to say:

> The single most important fault in Britain's social structure remains its propensity to accentuate class differences. . . Most foreigners can see this, but many people in Britain are curiously blind to the grim reality behind the Chancellor's words.

This is part of a stereotype. For many years now, politicians, journalists and academics have blamed on the class system just about any form of economic adversity or social malaise in Britain. Some of these allegations are plainly far fetched as, for example, the idea that a rigid or antiquated class system is responsible for balance of payments difficulties, when the balance of payments in fact often turns round from deficits to surpluses in a matter of weeks. And while the commentators often say that a weak pound reflects the class system, they do not often say the converse when the pound is strong. Thus, speaking again in London in October 1977, Herr Schmidt said that the British economy had improved greatly; but on that occasion he said nothing about class.

Neither the German Chancellor nor the writer in the *Financial Times* bothered to define the so-called mess, nor to spell out what they meant by the class system, nor how class accounts for the mess. Such rather basic omissions are typical in allegations about class. The underlying thrust is nevertheless clear, namely that the British class system is rigid and iniquitous, and leaves large reservoirs of talent unused to the detriment of both social peace and economic efficiency. It is also alleged to be an instrument of exploitation. The allegations misconceive the character of British society and the nature of economic activity. They also ignore simple and undisputed facts of British history and of British social, economic and political life.

Stereotype and Reality

According to the stereotype, Britain is governed by a rich ruling caste. Yet Disraeli was Prime Minister from 1866 to 1868 and 1874 to 1880; Lloyd George, a very poor orphan, brought up by an uncle who was a shoemaker, was Chancellor of the Exchequer by 1908, and Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922; and Ramsay MacDonald, illegitimate son of a fisherwoman, was Prime Minister in 1923-24 and from 1929 to 1935. None of them had been to university; Lloyd George and MacDonald had elementary education only, and Disraeli attended a relatively unknown secondary school. And although Mr Heath and Mrs Thatcher have been to university, their backgrounds are not exactly upper class. Nor, of course, are those of Mr Callaghan and Mr Healey.

Much critical comment on the role of class in British economic life is even more insubstantial. Those exposed to the stereotype

could not guess that British industry is managed, and has been managed for decades or even centuries, by new men, people who have made their own way, often from humble beginnings. This is evident in the motor, food processing, electrical, chemical, retailing, entertainment, building, property, and plantation industries. But it applies in a large measure also to steel, transport, shipbuilding, and the mass circulation newspapers. The British motor industry has always been in the hands of new men or of American companies; its troubles therefore cannot be attributed to class.

In the inter-war period the leading figure of the British motor industry was Lord Nuffield, who began as a bicycle repairer and had had very little education. He made a large fortune, with part of which he founded Nuffield College. Indeed, it is quite usual to read accounts in the newspapers of the careers of very rich people who have started with nothing side by side with articles complaining of the rigid class structure in Britain.

Unilever, one of the largest manufacturing companies in the world, grew out of a business started in the closing years of the nineteenth century by a Lancashire grocer who made his own soap. For many years the founder's successors as chairman and chief executive have been new men. Thus from 1960 to 1970 the position was held by Lord Cole, son of a clerk. Cole had a very modest education and started to work for the company at the age of seventeen. On retiring from Unilever, he became government-appointed chairman of Rolls-Royce. (His son went to Eton, and then to Oxford.) In mass retailing or catering, the prominence of new men, such as Sir Isaac Wolfson, Sir Charles Clore, or Sir Jack Cohen is familiar; that of the Sieffs, Salmons, and Glucksteins (Marks and Spencer and Lyons) dates from a few decades back.

Less familiar are the names of Sir John Hay (1882-1964), undisputed leader of the British rubber industry of the interwar and early postwar years; Sir John Ellerman (1862-1933), founder of the Ellerman shipping line, who at the time of his death was possibly the richest man in England; the first Lord Catto (1879-1959), chairman of Yule Catto, director of Morgan Grenfell, and finally Governor of the Bank of England. All three came from poor families and started their business careers in very modest jobs in city offices. Mr David Robinson, who recently gave £17 million to found a Cambridge college, is also a completely self-made man.

The higher Civil Service and Oxford and Cambridge are often thought of as the exclusive preserve of the upper and upper-middle classes, at any rate before the Second World War. But the first Lord Stamp of Shortlands (1880-1940) began as a clerk in the Inland Revenue in 1896. He reached a high position before he retired young, moved into industry, became a director of the Bank of England and chairman of the largest British railway company. The late Sir John Anderson, first Viscount Waverley (1882-1958), Governor of Bengal, Lord President of the Council and Home Secretary, was also a career civil servant with a middle-class background.

At Oxford and Cambridge some of the highest and most coveted positions have always been held by new men of very modest background, including people who had not been undergraduates there. For instance, Sir James Chadwick, the famous physicist, was a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, for most of the inter-war period, and became its Master in 1948. He was the son of an unskilled worker, and went to Manchester University on a scholarship.

Class domination of the British army before World War II is often thought to be so self-evident as not worth discussing. But for most of World War I the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was Sir William Robertson (1860-1933). Robertson was a man of lowly birth who enlisted as a private in the 1880s. He published his memoirs under the title *From Private to Field Marshal.* For most of his life he dropped his aitches.

Not even the diplomatic service was closed to people of humble origin. Sir Reader Bullard (1885-1976) was the son of an extremely poor casual labourer. He entered the consular service before World War I, having largely educated himself, and rose to become ambassador to Iran at a critical time.

These are not isolated examples. They can be multiplied indefinitely. Prominent writers and scholars have recognized for well over a century the extensive social mobility in Britain, and especially in British economic life. Tocqueville commented on the ease of entry into the British aristocracy in the nineteenth century, and the rise of new men in society and in business has often been noted at length by academics and others.

A few years ago Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, two American sociologists, published an authoritative book, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*[2] in which they argued that the degree of social mobility, including that affecting business

leadership, was much the same in Britain as in the United States. In that book they quote a study published in Britain in 1912 under the revealing title, *The Recruiting of the Employing Classes from the Ranks of the Wage Earners in the Cotton Industry.*[3] According to that study over two-thirds of owners, directors and managers in the cotton industry had begun their careers either as manual workers or in modest clerical positions. Lipset and Bendix wrote:

> . . . The researchers, surprised by their own findings, attempted to check them by interviewing company executives, union leaders, and economic historians of the industry. They found general agreement with their findings. Sidney Webb, the Fabian leader, commented, 'In Lancashire I think that practically all mill managers are taken from the ranks of the Spinners' Union'.

But the findings are of interest on wider grounds. First, the British cotton industry at the time was a relatively old industry so that the large proportion of new men may be surprising. Secondly, the industry has contracted considerably since World War I, which suggests that Britain's industrial decline has nothing to do with the class system.

There are many other academic studies which show the high degree of social mobility in Britain. They are often by authors who are critical of British politics and society but who are nevertheless prepared to recognize evidence on this point. (Examples include books by Professors D. V. Glass and John Westergaard.)[4]

Within the last year academic study has again provided notable confirmation of social mobility in Britain. It did so with evidence which is both detailed and wide ranging; and the results of the work surprised the researchers themselves, in much the same way as did those of the Lancashire survey of about seventy years ago. The findings of a major survey carried out by a group of research workers under the direction of Dr John Goldthorpe, Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, have recently become available. The results were noted in *New Society* of 10 November 1977 in an article which also emphasized the remarkable silence with which these highly interesting results were received. The article deserves to be quoted at some length:

> Over the past few months John Goldthorpe and his colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford, have begun to published the results of their analysis of social mobility in Britain in a variety of sociological journals. And these, for once, challenge rather than reinforce stereotypes.

> For they show that Britain is a much more mobile society than the received wisdom suggests: that we are a surprisingly open society, with people moving up and down the occupational escalators in a bewilderingly complex pattern. For example, only a quarter of those in social class I — managers and professionals — had fathers in the same category: rather less than the proportion drawn from a manual working class background (at least partly, of course, because the managerial class has been expanding so fast that it simply couldn't recruit from among its own members).
>
> Nor is the loud silence which has accompanied the publication of these findings an isolated example of the reaction to research which doesn't fit easily into conventional pigeon-holes.

The silence with which these findings were greeted is by no means unusual. The media rarely take cognizance of findings which discredit a stereotype accepted by themselves. However, the standard opinion on class has become to be disputed by scholars and others in non-academic publications. Thus Professor Donald Macrae wrote:

> We have never, since Elizabethan times, had serious legal barriers to moving up or down social ladders, never had a closed nobility of the European kind. Our statistics, which on this matter take us back with some doubts to the early twentieth century, suggest a high and constant rate of mobility equal to that of the United States and greater than in Western Europe.[5]

Professor Macrae's observations were not disputed. Indeed, a subsequent article in the same newspaper referred to 'the turbulent chaos of British social life, in which about two people in every five end up in a social class different from that occupied by their parents.' On this point, a letter in *The Observer* is informative and entertaining:

> I was interested in your questionnaire on TV and had intended to complete it, until I noticed the usual horrid little box at the end, asking me to state my "class". According to the sociologists, I have two middle-class sisters and one working-class. I have one middle-class and one working-class daughter. My son-in-law was middle-class until the age of 23, then became working-class for three years. He is now middle-class again. From now on I refuse to fill in any questionnaire which perpetuates such absurdity.[6]

In British economic life such mobility goes back many centuries. The expression "new rich" seems to have been used in England as early as the fifteenth century. And by the early eighteenth century Addison wrote:

> A superior capacity for business, and a more extensive knowledge, are steps by which a new man often mounts to favour, and out-shines the rest of his contemporaries.

Addison might almost have been anticipating the question asked by Lady Bracknell more than a century later in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: 'Was he born in what the radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?'

Emergence of Barriers

There are still no class barriers in access to wealth and to management in Britain. But in other ways British economic society is now less open, less flexible than in the past. The reasons for this are very different from those suggested by the standard complaints about the British class system.

In Britain the establishment and development of many businesses from small beginnings has become much more difficult in recent decades. This has come about as a result of nationalization of many activities, widespread licensing, far-reaching bureaucratization and heavy taxation both of persons and of small businesses. Again, housing policy (primarily rent controls), trade union restrictions, minimum wages, so-called employment protection and closed shops all reduce mobility both directly, and by making it more difficult to start new businesses. These policies and measures have made it difficult for people to rise from poverty to prosperity by means of legitimate business activity. For people of modest background such progress is now largely restricted to those who can advance through the civil service or corporate bureaucracy, or to the small number who can do so in the free professions. Many gifted working class children (as well as many other people) have the capacity to establish and run small businesses, but do not have the aptitudes or qualifications of a successful bureaucrat, or the skills required to succeed in a bureaucratic society.

Even journalism is becoming less open to talented and enterprising members of the working class. From the early nineteenth century until recently journalism presented an excellent opportunity of advance for talented people of working class background and with little formal education. Some of the great figures of nineteenth century and early twentieth century British journalism, including outstanding and influential editors of *The Times* and *The Observer*, came from modest backgrounds

and had little formal education. Compulsory unionization and the widespread insistence on formal qualifications have made such careers less likely.

This closure of opportunities has recently come to be well recognized. Some months ago an item in *The Times*[7] referred to the careers of Mr Louis Heren, deputy editor of *The Times*, and Admiral Sir Raymond Lygo, the Vice-Chief of Naval Staff. They were messenger boys together on *The Times* and rose to their exalted positions from this beginning. The report concluded that in journalism such careers are not possible today. Again, Mr Frank Johnson, Parliamentary sketch writer and editorial writer of *The Daily Telegraph*, received in January 1978 the award of Parliamentary Sketch Writer of the Year. He is the son of a working man, and his formal education terminated with one 'O' level (in commerce). He started as a messenger boy on the *Sunday Express*. He is emphatic that in present conditions such a career is no longer possible because of the widespread insistence on formal qualifications and career structure by unions and management.

As a result of these numerous restrictions Britain is now much less of an open society or economy — in the sense of a society or economy with *carrière ouverte aux talents* — than it was formerly.

It is not certain whether many working class children would be affected by the further extension of what has come to be called, rather misleadingly, higher education, or would benefit from it financially or otherwise. But the closure of many avenues of advance other than those for which formal qualifications are required will ensure continued intense concern with the extent of higher education and with the background of students.

The prospects of many talented working-class children have been prejudiced also by the abolition of many schools catering to their needs, and the replacement of these schools by institutions intended to serve as social engineering laboratories rather than as educational institutions. But these are not the complaints of the critics of the British class system.

These recent obstacles to social and economic mobility and advance owe much to the stereotype of the class system. The belief that British society is class-ridden and therefore restrictive

has paved the way for the politicization and bureaucratization of life. Measures introduced ostensibly to assist the poor and to promote greater equality and opportunity, have, in fact, restricted social, economic and occupational mobility and made it more difficult for enterprising, ambitious and self-reliant working class people to get on. In the prevailing climate of opinion, these obstacles to movement come to be attributed to a restrictive class system, an attribution which is then used spuriously to justify further extensions and the erection of further obstacles.

Differences and Adaptability

British society has for centuries displayed acute awareness of fine distinctions. The difference between a C.B. and a C.B.E. is recognized to this day throughout the Civil Service, and often beyond it. Civil servants are unhappy to receive a C.B.E. when they expect a C.B., or an O.B.E. when they hope for a C.B.E. Perception of differences extends far down the social scale — witness saloon bars, lounge bars and public bars in working class pubs.

In such matters as education, speech and dress, many freely and widely accepted distinctions are related to social standing and class. In this sense Britain has indeed always been a class society. But for about eight centuries Britain has not been a closed society, much less a caste society. Britain has not had a closed aristocracy or nobility since the early Middle Ages. Marriage, money, services or official favour enabled many aspiring members of the working and middle classes to enter the aristocracy, including the highest ranks. Wolsey was the son of a Yorkshire butcher. Queen Elizabeth I was descended from a serf.

Nor could class barriers have obstructed economic progress or damaged the social fabric, since no significant branch of British industry or commerce has ever been restricted to a particular class.

Until well into the nineteenth century Catholics, Jews and Nonconformists could not enter politics nor, for that matter, Oxford or Cambridge. The practical effect of these restrictions on industry and commerce was extremely limited. Any significance was probably the exact opposite to what has often been suggested, in that these barriers induced ambitious people within these groups to go into industry and commerce. The restrictions may, therefore, have contributed to the conspicuous

role of the Nonconformists in the development of British industry and commerce, notably so in such activities as banking, brewing, engineering and textiles.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Nonconformists were joined by the Jews. Their economic success shows how misleading it is to think that exclusion from political activity necessarily inhibits the economic prospects of a person or a group. Jews had no political rights in Europe until well into the nineteenth century, by which time, however, many of them had become extremely rich and prominent in many forms of economic activity.

The presence and the unenforced acceptance of social distinctions and differences, including small differences and fine distinctions, was the outcome of centuries of relatively peaceful history. And, in an open and mobile society, such differences and distinctions do not restrict talent or inhibit economic progress. In fact, they rather promote ambition and achievement because they offer inducement, something to go for, at all levels of society.

The British upper classes usually absorb new men very easily. Indeed, the new recruits soon become indistinguishable from the class into which they have been recruited. The ease with which the upper classes absorb new men is apt to mislead casual observers and to lend surface plausability to criticism. The situation, in fact, reflects the adaptability and tolerance of British society. But superficially it suggests a static society or even a rigid system. No one could have guessed the background of the late Sir James Chadwick from his conduct as Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, which was founded in 1348, and of which he became Master exactly 600 years later. Much the same could be said about Sir John Hay and about Lord Cole, whom I have already mentioned.

After only a single generation persons of working class origin can merge completely into the aristocracy. Thus the career, connections and even the physical appearance of the late Lord Robertson of Oakridge (1896-1974) would have suggested that he was an aristocrat. He was a general, British High Commissioner, Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, A.D.C. to two monarchs, company director and chairman of the British Transport Commission. He was the son of Field Marshall Sir William Robertson, a plebeian in appearance and some of his manners (p.4).

The conjunction of assumed rigidity and actual flexibility of the social system sets up pitfalls which can trap the unwary. When Sir Sydney Caine became the Director of the London School of Economics, one newspaper said that he had been educated at Harrow; in fact he had attended Harrow County School, a very different establishment.

Class, Exploitation and Education

Some variants of the principal line of criticism of the British class system deserve notice. One of these is the suggestion, sometimes explicit, sometimes implied, that the prosperity of the well-to-do has been extracted from the rest of the population. There have always been some groups or individuals who have benefitted from monopoly, or from state subsidies, or from political manipulation. But even in the aggregate, such instances have not been of major overall significance in the industrial and commercial fortunes over the last two hundred years. In recent decades, political muscle has become significant in raising the incomes of politically effective groups, notably recipients of state subsidies, or members of trade unions, and also certain groups of bureaucrats. This has nothing to do with the traditional class system.

The allegedly restrictive character and class bias of English education is often blamed for various economic and social difficulties. However, the educational system did not preclude rapid British economic progress in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, promoted and propelled largely by people with little formal education, a phenomenon which academics and educationalists seem reluctant to recognize. Moreover, neither the presence nor the privileges of Oxford and Cambridge, nor the prestige of the public schools enabled them to stop other groups from setting up academies and schools. There was no general state education in England until well into the nineteenth century, but there was no official barrier to the setting up of educational institutions. Again, the educational system in Scotland was quite different from that in England. There were old universities in Scotland, and these were not restricted to members of the Church of England, nor controlled by it, and the school system there was also more extensive than in England. Yet Scotland has not outdistanced England either in economic performance or in industrial relations. Nor is it sensible to describe the restrictions of the educational system as class-bound, when those against

whom it discriminated included aristocrats such as the Dukes of Norfolk as Catholics.

Much has been made of the large proportion of Prime Ministers and cabinet ministers in the twentieth century who had been to Oxford and Cambridge. This is not evidence of the allegedly closed character of British politics. To a considerable extent it reflects the prestige which ability and education commanded in British politics until recently; the inclination of those with political ambition to go to university, coupled with the emphasis at Oxford and Cambridge on studies helpful in political life; and the access of gifted persons from all ranks of society to these universities. The careers of Sir Harold Wilson, Mr Heath, Mrs Thatcher and Mr Healey reflect the open nature of Oxford and Cambridge, rather than the allegedly closed character of British political life.

Poise and Vulnerability

The relatively peaceful history of Britain, the absence of foreign invasion or occupation and of violent revolutions (at any rate since the mid-seventeenth century), and the ready acceptance of differences, including social differences, imparted poise and self-assurance to the upper and upper-middle classes and to the representatives of traditional institutions. This poise made it possible to resist outside pressures. A Cambridge college, an institution widely regarded as class-ridden and insular, has unhesitatingly elected foreigners to highly coveted fellowships at times of substantial unemployment, or at times when the country was swept by xenophobia. Similarly, it was able to elect to a Fellowship a scholar from Communist China a few days after a Chinese force heavily defeated a British regiment in Korea. Such action is far less likely, perhaps even unthinkable, in American and Continental universities, which are generally thought to be much less class ridden and restrictive than Oxford and Cambridge.

But the prolonged and largely unquestioned acceptance of differences and distinctions also made for vulnerability, in that the upper and upper-middle classes were not forced to examine or rationalize their position. They were thus ill-placed to face the upsurge of egalitarianism in the Western world. Having taken their situation for granted, they could not analyse or explain it. Their spokesmen or representatives knew and, perhaps, could even articulate the distinction in rank between a baron, a baronet,

and a knight, or even between a C.B. and a C.B.E., but not that between a differentiated yet open and mobile society on the one hand and a restrictive, closed, or caste society on the other. Nor were they able to scrutinize effectively such arguments as that the incomes of the well-to-do had been secured at the expense of the poor. They were thus unable to counter the arguments such as those often adduced for egalitarian policies, or in favour of the far-reaching privileges to trade unions. More generally, they were unable to resist effectively the arguments and sentiments which resulted in the politicization of social and economic life, a politicization often deemed necessary to offset the alleged restrictive class bias in British politics.

The upper and middle classes were intellectually unarmed to meet the egalitarian thrust, perhaps even more than are businessmen to meet the more specifically economic arguments of self-styled egalitarians. The resulting loss of poise and nerve was accentuated by the emergence of a guilt feeling over the presence of differences, in the face of growing belief that all such differences are abnormal and reprehensible. This feeling of guilt is widespread in the contemporary West, notably among the second or third generation of the industrial and commercial rich in a Protestant culture. The pervasive and subtle influence of the machine on thought and language may also have served to discredit social and economic differences. A machine turns out identical products. There is something wrong with a mould or a steel press or a lathe if its products are not identical. The judgment that there is something wrong with social and economic differences may owe something to this criterion of efficiency.

Intellectuals and Egalitarians

British intellectuals are much more preoccupied with class than their counterparts on the Continent, where class distinctions have usually been much clearer and firmer. There may be various reasons for this preoccupation of British intellectuals. Because they read and write English, they are apt to compare British society with American society (which on the surface at any rate is more open than British society), rather than with the other societies which in any case they know much less well. The long and relatively peaceful continuity of British history and society may have been a more important factor.

The absence of violent change has suggested a stable social

system and an impregnable and static ruling class. The unobtrusive ease with which new men rose in the social scale and became indistinguishable from their former social superiors reinforces the plausability of this suggestion. The open and mobile character of British society compared to Continental society may also have enhanced preoccupation with class. It made the aristocracy and the prosperous groups more accessible and conspicuous, and thus more envied and resented than elsewhere. They therefore became more obvious targets than their counterparts abroad when envy and resentment became more pronounced and widespread than formerly.

The reasons which I have suggested for the obsession of the British intelligentsia on class are somewhat conjectural. This is inevitable. Arguments and expressions of opinion can be assessed on the basis of evidence and logic but why people put forward or accept certain opinions always involves an element of conjecture. But whatever the reasons behind the misleading stereotype of the class system, its widespread acceptance has sustained policies which are restrictive, which obstruct economic achievement and advance, and which cause resentment and even bitterness. As I have noted earlier, these sentiments are misdirected because they are based on mistaken ideas about the forces behind the restrictive measures.

The persistent harping on differences and distinctions is not designed to bring about equality, but to promote a thoroughly politicized society in which all aspects of life are subject to political direction. But the large scale, politically enforced reduction of social and economic differences, serves only to exacerbate another difference, namely that between rulers and subjects. The ultimate goal of political egalitarians is precisely the abolition of all differences except those between rulers and subjects. Those who do not relish this prospect will do well to examine critically the stereotype of the class system, and also ponder both the background of social and economic differences, and the ultimate objective of ostensibly egalitarian measures.

Notes

1. *Financial Times*, 11 December 1975.
2. University of California Press, 1959.
3. S. J. Chapman and F. J. Marquis, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, volume 75, 1912, pp. 293-306.
4. D. V. Glass: *Social Mobility in Britain*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954; J. Westergaard: *Class in Capitalist Society* (with H. Resler), Heinemann, 1975.
5. *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 November, 1975.
6. *The Observer*, 28 April 1976.
7. *The Times*, 8 December, 1977.