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## SOCIETY: NEW AND OLD

**T**HE PARADOX OF post-war Britain is that the social structure has not changed much, while the superstructure—or more precisely the most visible aspects of Britain's social life, its habits and customs—has undergone widespread change. The second of these observations is obvious, but not so much the first, which has been obscured by a number of factors. To start with, outward appearances and lifestyles in Britain have clearly altered: middle-aged workers from the provinces taking their holiday in Rimini rather than Scarborough; the building boom that has left our city centres unrecognizable; the transformation of Britain from officially among the most puritanical societies into one of the most sexually permissive; the newly multi-national and multi-racial character of urban life; the Profumo scandal. An undercurrent of self-analysis and self-observation now runs through the press and broadcast media, though not yet reaching the level of introspection found in the United States. Whoever takes his temperature from hour to hour tends to exaggerate the importance of momentary fluctuations. In those happy times when the British people viewed themselves with an uncritical conviction of their superiority, they felt all the steadier for not registering such movements. Today we have to pay attention to them. Finally, a cloud of propaganda has formed around the British situation, creating pseudo-problems of change.

Anyone reliving their own memories of the 1945 Labour government will recall the nonsense that spread in political circles. Labour spokesmen maintained that Britain had undergone a 'silent revolution'. Both Labour and Conservatives claimed that the rich had been wiped out by taxation and that the reign of economic equality had begun. Ten years later, the

publicists of the 'affluent society' were saying that we had 'never had it so good'. Poverty had disappeared, and if at this point no one had the nerve to claim that wealth had vanished too, the old British class distinctions were said to have been lost in the shared communal aspirations of all, which were being realized in television sets, cars and other consumer goods. Some—mostly people with no socialist sympathies whatsoever—went so far as to ask, quite seriously, whether Labour, as a class-conscious working-class party, had any future at all. Meanwhile, another category of myth was elaborated: that of British decline. Listening to debates at the time over Britain's entry into the Common Market was a disconcerting experience. An unwary observer could have been led to believe that this country had not only ceased to be a great empire and military power—which was obvious—but had become a kind of greater Portugal. The sheer amount of time and typewriter ribbon wasted in circulating and recirculating these caricatures might in itself have sufficed to raise British productivity.

Britain, of course, is a country that loves myths, and this has always made any realistic assessment of its social situation difficult. The pioneer of industrialism—and the country in which urbanization has advanced further than anywhere else in the world—still delights in promoting itself with photographs of pretty thatched cottages in small villages, which have the advantage of attracting American tourists more effectively than any other kind of publicity. We are bent under the burden of the monarchy, hereditary peerage, royal honours and decorations, pompous customs and ceremony; but in reality it is easier for a relatively poor man with no family or other social connections to go into 'business' and become a millionaire in Britain than in the United States. The image of our law is majestic and just, but an ordinary citizen will almost certainly get fairer treatment in several other European countries. Scotland Yard is a byword for investigative efficiency, but Britain today is the classic homeland of gigantic bank robberies carried out by 'persons unknown'. Britain proudly talks up its civil liberties, but a civil servant accused, let's say, of communist sympathies almost certainly has stronger legal and constitutional guarantees in De Gaulle's France than on this side of the Channel. Illusion and reality remain separated by a gulf as great in its own way as that separating the Lord Mayor of London—a businessman appointed every year to preside at banquets and picturesque processions—from the actual running of the city, with which he has nothing to do.

Beneath these layers of myth-making, the real changes in Britain's fundamental structures have been negligible. This is owing in the first place to the fact that there was little room for fundamental change. Before the War Britain was already, in terms of social stratification, the most polarized of all the big modern states. Only around 6 per cent of the working population were employed in agriculture, mainly as labourers, as against the 88 per cent employed on monthly salaries or weekly wages. Small merchants, artisans, direct cultivators and other 'self-employed' also made up just 6 per cent of the population. Since then, polarization has increased slightly—mainly thanks to the decline of the small intermediate layers—but without a reversal of long-range historical tendencies, changes of this nature are necessarily small.

Within the frame of this general situation, there were naturally more spectacular phases, though these only perpetuated a pre-war, international trend. Two-thirds of Britain's male population are manual workers, and among the unskilled—and in certain sectors, such as construction—foreign immigrants form a disproportionately large element. However, the largest contingent among these immigrants come from the traditional reserve of unskilled labour that is Ireland, which now sends up to a third of its total population to the neighbouring island. The influx of coloured workers—mostly West Indians and Pakistanis—was effectively blocked in 1962 by discriminatory legislation.<sup>1</sup> Non-manual and 'white-collar' occupations are in a phase of expansion, but this coincides with their assimilation to proletarian status, or at least their willingness to join trade unions. Since 1945, professions such as university teachers, bank employees, technical and 'concept' staff have been organized in earnest. More important still, the entry of large and hitherto independent organizations of clerical employees into the Trade Union Congress, the confederation of British unions with close ties to the Labour Party, is now freely discussed.

Examining the situation as a whole, there have been no surprising or dramatic changes in the class structure or the distribution of occupations in the country. Employers are still employers, even if the state features

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<sup>1</sup> Britain's economic inertia and the decline of some salaried occupations have, however, led to mass emigration among technicians, professionals and dissatisfied members of the lowermost middle classes, which has to some extent offset the influx.

more prominently than before; workers have mostly remained workers, and those who do not live week-to-week or month-to-month by pay packet or cheque are increasingly rare. It is logical that, on average, the British are much better off. The simple fact that unemployment, which never fell below 10 per cent between the wars, has with rare exceptions been negligible since 1945, would in itself have guaranteed improvement. The social reforms of the 1945 Labour government have been an almost universal benefit, although paradoxically the class that has benefited most from them is less well-off salaried professionals rather than workers. This advance is so patent that until recently the persistence of poverty and appalling housing conditions was largely ignored. Last year, one in ten British citizens had to resort—at one time or another—to the National Assistance Board (the modern successor to the old Poor Law), and working-class life is still, in effect, a sentence of poverty. But the TV aerials, automobiles and washing machines that are becoming ever more common speak for themselves. From a material point of view, life for the majority of people is easier and better. For some groups, such as the relatively well-paid young in the few years between school and early marriage, it is much easier. Money and the certainty of being able to find a job afford them a measure of freedom—holidays and travel, for example—that workers certainly did not enjoy in the interwar period.

For several years, sociologists have, as a result, identified an *embourgeoisement* of the British working class. However, factual evidence tells against the idea that this has come about on any great scale. Nor is there any special reason why such a phenomenon should occur. It is simply petty-bourgeois shallowness to suppose that the only thing preventing the working class from adopting all the forms and values of middle-class life is a lack of money. Even to the extent that this is true, the relative prosperity of the majority of British workers has been too modest and fleeting to attain the standard of living that the advertising industry would like to force on them. For the majority of those who can afford cars and washing machines, these are *useful* objects, not symbols of social status. Their problem is still—too often—how to secure a decent livelihood, not ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. In any case, there are large sectors of the working class, especially in the old industrial regions, where common traditions survive uninterrupted. The *Andy Capp* cartoons, published by the most typical mass-circulation newspaper with a working-class audience, London’s *Daily Mirror*, continues to present the British worker dear to tradition, at home with his cloth cap, a fag in the

corner of his mouth, in shirt-sleeves and braces, lording it over his wife as his grandfather did. And it is no accident that the most successful television series is *Coronation Street*, the never-ending epic of a working-class neighbourhood in a typical Northern industrial city.

Naturally, the working-class communities of the past, close-knit and organized, have lost their cohesive character under the impact of industrial transformation, housing redevelopment and full employment. A whole sociological and semi-sociological literature has grown up deploring such decline, but those who depict the slums of Leeds and Bethnal Green as a kind of lost spiritual paradise mostly tend to be middle-class intellectuals—especially those whose parents were working-class—and misguided socialists who regret workers' tendency to watch television rather than join committees and adult education classes. It is true, however, that labour-movement organizations play a smaller part than they once did in the everyday life of all but the most old-school, as do traditional activities like going to a football match. Still, under the surface, proletarian reflexes and habits live on intensely. Sociologists doing field-work in a typical new residential area find to their surprise (but not that of the inhabitants) that the norms of life are clearly still those of the old working-class districts. Voting Labour is an abiding reflex of class consciousness. 'It's the workers' party' is the reply almost invariably given by Labour supporters when asked the reason for their vote. There is an explanation for this. Class differences in Britain don't only remain strong: in a certain sense they have crystallized into differences of caste. This phenomenon operates from high to low, through a transformation of both the rich and the poor.

### *Polarizations*

One of the most macabre jokes of the past twelve years of Conservative government has been the return to upper-class customs at the very moment when the foundations of Britain's imperial grandeur began to crumble. The Belle Époque to which Macmillan aspires—as do Adenauer and De Gaulle—is that before the First World War: the clubs of St James, the receptions in ducal country seats, the grouse shoots in Scotland, the aristocrats with cousins in government who survey their estates dressed in tweeds cut on Savile Row. All the institutions of the Edwardian era—the clubs; the private schools, over-priced and select, and ironically called 'public schools'—have enjoyed a period of

unequaled prosperity. Today, strangely, Conservative MPs and ministers are much more *aristocratic* than they were in the interwar years: only one in six ministers belongs to a family whose fortunes were amassed within the span of a single generation, and half belong to the traditional upper classes and aristocracy. It is true that few men today with serious weight in British economic life—businessmen and trade unionists alike—would wish to exchange the real influence they exercise for the illusory importance of a seat in Parliament, or, if they are very rich, to accept the financial sacrifice that a government position would bring with it. At least one minister has preferred to resign rather than take the risk of selling his shares in the family firm at an unfavourable price. It is also true that the official face of government corresponds less and less to the real structure of British capitalism.

Power in British society, however, is also increasingly remote from the life of the working class. Those who take the decisions are an elite either of university graduates—largely recruited from Oxford and Cambridge, except in some scientific disciplines—or public-school alumni, or both. Even today, no more than two or three in a hundred young people in their twenties are studying, and not more than 1 per cent attend ‘public schools’. The rich are not only so rich that their fortunes alienate them from the social majority—ever since the fear of post-war Labour governments has passed, they have recovered their courage and a taste for displaying their riches. But there is more: their *modus operandi* in itself separates them from those who live on a salary or wages. The latter pay tax on their income. They have no choice, since it is deducted directly from their pay. But people who enjoy income from property or commercial enterprises have access to a huge and perfectly legal pyramid of devices for tax evasion, and until some time ago the main source of gross income during the long boom, capital appreciation, was tax-exempt. In the postwar period, this complex of ‘business expenses’, tax evasion schemes, nominal property transfers, tax-exempt trusts, pension funds and benefits of various kinds came to counter-balance the theoretical tendency towards an egalitarian redistribution of income by fiscal means, and, as Professor Richard Titmuss has shown, has led—at least since 1948—to rapidly growing income inequality. But the issue goes deeper than this. The whole framework of how those who do not live on wages or a salary organize their finances is as irrelevant and incomprehensible to 90 per cent of the population as the rules of heraldry were to medieval serfs. The one thing they understand is that it

involves deception and swindling. (The moral distinction between 'tax avoidance', which is legal, and 'tax evasion', which is not, persuades only a few, including those who benefit from tax evasion.)

Far below these heights, most British workers live in entirely different conditions. At the bottom of the social scale, that third of the population consisting of unskilled or semi-skilled manual labourers faces an entire life of laborious routine, without interest or future. Their only prospect of escape upward is the same as that of the Neapolitan poor or black people—even if their material situation is naturally better—namely luck (a win on the lottery or being 'discovered' as a popular singer) or skill in sport or art. Education, the only effective means of social mobility, holds out little for their children, and nothing of any use to themselves. On the contrary, Britain's anti-democratic education system has since 1944 officially excluded the majority of children at the age of eleven from any serious prospect of completing their education, convinced from the outset that they belong to a permanently inferior caste. The fact that education is in theory open to all only underlines their sense of exclusion. It was among the youth of this social layer that the 50s saw a telling kind of class consciousness expressed in an idealization of 'stars' of the silver screen who reflect the social characteristics of this group. The ideal pop singer of the late 50s was a lad under the age of twenty who had done manual jobs (sailor or lorry-driver's helper), without any particular talent or ability, and who spoke with a strong working-class accent. Middle-class values not only had no appeal for this social layer—except insofar as they wanted what money could buy—they were even unpopular, as representing what unskilled and semi-skilled workers could never hope to obtain. At the same time, the *embourgeoisement* of Labour's leaders rendered their politics and organization unattractive. Only the campaign against the H-bomb, with its atmosphere of anarchic rebellion against *any* constituted order, had an impact on this lost generation. In Britain, the so-called rockers decorated their leathers with the symbol of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Not even skilled industrial workers, pillars of the labour movement, are tempted to distance themselves from class consciousness, because the difference between those who do what most consider a proper job and those who do nothing is perhaps starker than ever. A recent television programme exploring the state of Britain in the age of automation predicted (correctly) the survival of groups of experienced and

indispensable workers, proud of their ability, who would repair, maintain and construct buildings and machinery in the future and fine-tune their prototypes: working at their normal rhythm, wearing their usual clothes, drinking their traditional tea, insisting—according to contract—on the presence of a ‘mate’ to help them with the appropriate tools; and they would almost certainly be valued members of their trade unions. The prospect is not that these men imagine themselves as middle-class but that their numbers are destined to decline. In fact, those more immediately threatened by the advance of automation are not skilled workers but the unskilled and semi-skilled, and above all the great mass of office staff and others employed in routine activities.

The real no man’s land, socially and politically, is occupied by the third of the population not engaged in manual labour. And since this third also includes those who write articles and prepare broadcast material, the air of discomfort that lingers in many assessments of today’s Britain reflects their own uncertainty. This group evidently includes occupations on the rise as well as those in decline. At one extreme there are the traditional middle classes in their most modest incarnation, employees who live in small suburban houses with rising mortgage costs or other home loans, mounting daily commuting expenses, and relatively straitened incomes on which to maintain the ever more costly demands of a ‘respectable’ standard of living alongside the more affluent Joneses. It was the revolt of local electorates made up of people like this, Orpington among them, that marked the beginning of the Conservatives’ collapse and the Liberal revival. If Britain has a potentially fascist class it is this one. Fear, resentment and hatred—of the working class, Americans, black people, communists—are expressions of their anxieties.

At the other extreme are dynamic professionals, the technical and scientific cadres of mid-twentieth-century society: people who were successful in school, secure in themselves and their social function, resentful only at their lack of social status and material reward, which they ascribe partly to the stagnation and inefficiency of the British economy and partly to a rigid and outdated system of ‘prestige’. A survey recently conducted by a periodical read exclusively by people of this type under the age of 40 summarizes their attitude very well. For them, the institutions in most pressing need of reform are the unions, industrial organizations and Parliament; the least, on the other hand, is the social security system. ‘Massive investment in education and technical training’ is the



most important national task; 'reinforcement of the Western alliance' and entry into the Common Market are of no importance to them. They see greater social equality and a healthier attitude to sex as the most conspicuous changes in British life since the war. Three-quarters oppose a British nuclear deterrent, two-thirds public schools. A majority reject American films and television programmes, though they love foreign holidays and Italian design. They are neutral or in favour of black immigration. Forty per cent have considered emigrating (to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the USA or Sweden), in hopes of higher incomes, better working conditions and a more congenial social system. Seventy per cent have no objection to government control of industry. These are the new men and women of the British middle classes in the age of bureaucracy and technocracy: a little to the left of centre, in certain ways parochial, politically still undecided. They are typical representatives of a very large number of voters who in recent years have withdrawn their support for the Conservatives without yet embracing Labour. It is to them that Harold Wilson, himself a professional of this social type (provincial grammar school, scholarship award, scientific research projects, administrator and economist), addresses the electoral propaganda of the Labour Party.

### *Structural divergence*

Nothing is more ridiculous than the idea of a Britain in which traditional class distinctions and conflicts are in decline. However, while they persist and continue to furnish the basis of British politics—which is a direct struggle between the party of the employers and older middle classes, and the workers' party—these distinctions and conflicts have been strangely muted and modified since the turn of the 1950s. The most conspicuous proof of this is the crisis of both the major parties—the Conservatives' loss of support, which became increasingly evident from 1956, and the incapacity of Labour to expand its solid and, short of a massacre, indestructible bloc of support in the working class. This in turn created the void the Liberal Party has temporarily filled, attracting support above all from dissatisfied middle-class voters. (It took very little from Labour.)

The discomfort with traditional politics that expressed itself in this was partly due to the growing divergence between the organizational structures and leaderships of capital and labour and the real economic

and social tendencies of the country. The former are both conservative and therefore very inefficient. An investigation into the running of selected British industries (by the statistician Tibor Barna) found that the most dynamic and rational firms were almost without exception those founded by foreigners (refugees, for example) from 1940 onwards; those controlled by minority groups such as Quakers and Jews; and the British branches of foreign firms. (To which might be added that there emerged a close correlation between bad traditional management and bad civic architecture.) At the same time, the structure of the trade-union movement, with its myriad sectoral and general organizations, has never adapted to industrial developments beyond the nineteenth century. This is partly due to the Labour leadership's inability to grasp the opportunity of 1945, resulting in widespread disappointment and apathy, and the familiar propensity of Labour to transform itself into a minor appendix to the British governing class. The Labour Party, the permanent, potential government of Britain, has persistently acted as though governing—with the exception of rare intervals—is the duty of the ruling classes.

But the muting of traditional conflicts is also the upshot of the general demoralization of life in Britain in the decade of 'the affluent society'. The past few years were the first in which most of the population was regularly employed, many on wages that were not wholly inadequate. In the absence of leadership on the part of the labour movement, these years were also the first in which the values of a commercial consumer society influenced the fabric of British life. This occurred in the context of a stagnant and generally parasitic economy in which, even among the rich, the largest and most conspicuous fortunes were made not from productive activity but from buying and selling, publicity and speculation on the stock and property markets. The advertising agent and public-relations expert, who have become the main target of the young middle-class satirists, are naturally not the cause but only symptoms of this state of affairs. But the consequences are serious. This was the moment when the *Daily Mirror*, a newspaper sophisticated enough to have built the largest circulation in Britain by capturing the precise tone of working-class feeling, supplemented its combination of mawkishness, sport, pretty girls and radical politics with a new interest in business and share prices.

The demoralization of the traditional upper classes is the most obvious legacy of these years. The Profumo scandal clearly symbolized the

fusion of the most exalted parasites with the lowest. A group of attractive young women forged a direct link between the government and aristocracy, the property speculators who exploit West Indians and force them to live in slums, journalists, film producers, tax experts and the usual undergrowth of petty criminals and drug-dealers. Or more precisely, it was money—which, tradition has it, doesn't smell—that bound them all together. The much less publicized lobbying scandal, which involved public-relations agents (with the help of certain MPs) using the House of Commons to launch various commercial products, illustrates the same tendencies. But subtler, less obvious incursions into the traditional ethics of the British working class are also important. They are in turn symbols of the exceptional decline in the quality of work in Britain, which has been much discussed in recent years. The motto of the 1950s, 'I'm all right, Jack', runs absolutely contrary to the principles by which the British working class has always organized its life: mutuality, solidarity and respect for labour. 'A fair day's work for a fair day's pay' is not a slogan that expresses an overly high level of class consciousness, but it governed the actions of British workers for more than a century. It implied not only a militant attitude and decent working conditions on the part of the worker, but decent employment that did not deprive others of the same. Employment and other things should be shared out 'fairly'. In the mid-1950s it was still difficult to find local managers for the Steel Company of Wales because even the educated sons of Welsh workers could not break with the old tradition that a man should not be another man's boss. With all its weaknesses, the massive British trade union movement, which is the despair of those who want the workers to subordinate everything to maximizing productivity, was the guardian of this tradition. This is the ethical code that the past twelve years have undermined, resulting in widespread demoralization.

What characterizes Britain today is the combination of a strong, increasingly polarized social structure and the weakening, both organizational and moral, of the superstructure that was once its expression. Both are important, but the first is fundamental. No one can reasonably expect a social revolution in Britain; but equally, no one is expecting rapid Americanization, except in superficial respects that any modern industrial society finds to its taste, especially consumer goods from the USA. Britain's political prospects are not those of a Kennedy-style 'New Frontier', although some middle-class commentators—and some Labour intellectuals who always look for inspiration in capitalist, not

socialist societies—are tempted to think in those terms. Nor yet does the outlook suggest the complex process by which a communist or socialist minority can gradually gain the leadership of a mass popular movement, as in the countries of the Common Market. What lies ahead is the simple prospect of a Labour government representing today as it did in 1945 the traditions of the working class and the new salaried professional classes, based on a numerical majority of the British people and its labour movement.

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