

Y e t m i ŝ b i r i n c i K o n f e r a n s

Social Statüs In Contemporary Britain

by

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One may say that class in Britain involves three broad elements. The first derives from the era of aristocratic ascendancy up to the close of the 18 th century: birth and breeding. The second derives from the period of capitalist ascendancy in the mid-19th century and is based on wealth and ownership in relation to production. The third derives from the educational revolution of the 20 th century and is based on skill and knowledge. The extraordinary continuity of British society which must be always remembered is perhaps best indicated by the fact that 'classics' as an aspect of the aristocratic style has not yet fully given way in prestige to engineering and social science as an aspect of the democratic style.

Occupation, which is often used as an index of social class, in fact involves all three of these elements in class: aristocratic birth, capitalist wealth and democratic education. Let me illustrate. The prestige of certain occupations is partly related to the fact that their personnel have been recruited from the aristocracy. For instance the less well-off sections of the aristocracy and the younger sons who could not hope to inherit often went into the medical profession or the Anglican priesthood, so heightening the prestige of these occupations. At the same time, occupations have prestige in accordance with the extent of the remuneration. A stockbroker derives prestige from his wealth. Education and skill also count: education in particular generally confers certain tastes and manners which go to make up an assesment of class. Thus a Keeper of MSS at the British Museum may not receive a large salary but he has prestige as a man of cultivation and education.

The prestige of an occupation gives us the class of particular persons, and this prestige is compounded of the various factors which I have

just mentioned. All three together will give uniformly high status whereas only one may well result in a rather marginal position although there are exceptions. For instance let us take a Conservative M.P. His prestige may derive from birth and breeding, from wealth and from education. Let us suppose that he was the son of Lord Weymouth, a landed proprietor of ancient pedigree owning highly lucrative estates of town property. He was sent to Eton* and from there went to Christchurch, Oxford. After a spell as a Guards Officer he was accepted as Conservative candidate for a constituency in the rural county of Wiltshire. Such a person is indubitably upper class. Supposing however his estate management fails and he becomes bankrupt: is he still a member of the upper class, even though he is no longer wealthy? Most people would answer in the affirmative. It would appear then that for upper class membership the fact of birth and breeding is sufficient in itself.

Let us now suppose a *newly* rich business man (a diminishing category): he has wealth and perhaps education but the absence of birth debars him from the aristocratic upper class, although he may become a junior member through some honours list. Indeed his wealth and consequent power are so great that he is almost bound either in this generation or the next to become assimilated to the upper class by a formal title. But now suppose a successful shopkeeper: he has money but lacks either birth or education his middle class position may be marginal and some might even say that given a working class background he remained working class all his life. It would depend on how he chose to live his life: and we must return later to this element of choice in class. A primary school teacher by contrast has education, but neither birth nor much wealth. He again is middle class, but only marginally so. A doctor, however, though he performs an analogous function, yet because he receives a high remuneration, because he has received long training and because of certain aristocratic connections with the profession, has confirmed and high position in the middle class. Thus, through these examples, we can see the way in which the criteria of birth, wealth and education interpenetrate to determine in which class a particular occupation should be placed. Let a steel-worker or motor industry technician 750-1000 earn £ 30 - £ 49 a week he is still not middle class.

*) Perhaps I should refer here to the 'Public Schools Commission' currently about to report on the appropriate form and degree of integration between these socially elite schools and the state system.

Before going on to consider status we must briefly mention this aspect of choice in class. It is not specially wide but it exists. A person existing at the margin of one class and another class may often choose to identify himself with one class or the other by adopting a certain way of life. He can take the Guardian or the Telegraph, go to the theatre, use the appropriate accent and wear the right clothes in order to become middle class. Or he can speak in an ungrammatical fashion, read the right clothes in order to become middle class. Or he can speak in an ungrammatical fashion, read the Mirror, watch independent T.V. and wear overalls, in order to become working class. Most black-coated workers chose to be middle class in the way described, in spite of the fact that so far as income is concerned they are roughly equal to prosperous members of the working class. In brackets, one may say that the sartorial differentia of class are now often very subtle and in the case of women almost non-existent. Speech on the other hand remains the best indicator, though still not an infallible guide.

We come now to what is really a highly complex problem that of somehow relating the notion of status to the notion of class and distinguishing the specific elements involved in status. Quite plainly, what we have been discussing so far has included status. Indeed we have used the word several times: and moreover in ordinary speech we refer to upper class or middle class *status*. It would seem then that most of what we have described as belonging to class also belongs to class also belongs to status. Breeding, wealth, ownership and education are all relevant to what we mean by status. At the same time it remains true that whereas class is most closely related to the economic element and to production, status is most closely bound up with consumption. We must explore this difference.

Let me illustrate. In the heyday of mid 19th century a crucial difference was between those who owned and those who did not. Things were scarce. Where goods are scarce some people can only possess at the expense of others: society is thus sharply divided along classical Marxist lines into possessors and those who do not possess. It is this division between haves and have-nots which creates class and with it class conflict. But in the modern situation scarcity has given way to widespread affluence and the division is no longer between haves and have-nots but between haves and have-mores. Now, this is obviously a much less crucial division than the division arising from scarcity. In a situation where everybody *has* there is less likelihood of basic conflict.

Instead of basic conflict we have an attempt on the part of each group to improve their position relative to their near neighbours and along with that an attempt on the part of each individual to improve his position. It is worth indicating that the aspirations of competing groups are based on limited comparisons with cognate occupations and are therefore limited in scope.

One very important indicator of this competition between one group and another or even one individual and another is the pattern of consumption. Here, of course, the elements of choice, to which we referred previously, has its relevance. But one cannot choose outside certain limits and these are set by the extent to which one is remunerated. There is the element of choice and there is the limit which is set by income. Now where incomes are relatively close together the element of choice is increased and this means that discrimination becomes increasingly important. Discrimination is based on education and social experience and since at the same time national needs place a greater and greater premium on education, the determining factor in the style of consumption chosen tends to be education. In other words, a person makes out his claim for status on the basis of a particular style of consumption rather than on his particular position as an owner or a worker. He chooses to live in a certain way, within the limiting factors set by his income, on the basis of his background, education and social experience.

He decorates his house in a certain way, brings up his children in a particular fashion, goes to this place rather than to that place for his holiday.

Let us take the question of choosing a holiday. People of very similar income levels will indicate wide differences in status by their choice of holiday. Now it is possible to spend £ 50 on your holiday at Scunthorpe or at Blackpool. It is also possible to go to Yugoslavia for a roughly similar sum. The person who does the latter maybe indicating a different kind of background, a wider range of experience and a liveliness of mind appropriate to a certain type of status.

But here we come up against a difficulty which will indicate a certain aspect of the status system. Suppose the voyager to Yugoslavia meets the traveller to Scunthorpe : the admirer of Scunthorpe may not *realise* that his choice of holiday reflects on his social status. This presents a difficulty since in the past everybody recognised the insignia of class but

these subtle indications of status are today often only recognised in limited circles. This is the problem faced by a person aspiring to or possessing high status living in an area of society where his insignia of status are not recognised. He may live in a block of suburban flats and outside his block entrance will be parked his ancient 1920 car with open top and hung sidelights. In Chelsea this would be the approved type of car for a certain kind of middle class person, but to the inhabitants of the block it only indicates abysmal poverty.

The point is that some aspects of the status system are not continuous throughout society. Other aspects are. You have as it were, some positions, activities, and possessions which are universally recognised as giving status, while others are only recognised in limited pockets of society. Moreover, there are some activities and possessions which confer positive status in one type of group and which confer negative status in *another* type of group. Thus status may be divided into two kinds: a general hierarchy widely recognised throughout the whole society and perhaps through several societies and a limited hierarchy confined sometimes to certain groups, like professions and sometimes merely to a particular circle of acquaintances. Supposing you are a Senior Civil Servant and have a Bentley: your status is widely recognised. On the other hand, you may be a champion wrestler, but this only gives you status within the wrestling world: it may actually cost you status outside that world - supposing that you ever move outside. You may be a radiologist: in that case your status is not known outside the sphere of hospital physics. It seems to be technical and therefore vaguely middle class, but your precise position is not easily assessed. The only clues are provided by your appearance, manners and possessions and it may be that the significance of such clues is only known to limited areas of the educated professional classes. The presence of the record player with its Mahler symphonies and the absence of the T. V. from the living room are understood by them, but may be seriously misunderstood by others. This means large areas of social anonymity. The system is multidimensional. To some extent each area of society has its own frame of reference.

Of course, to revert to our previous discussion, this lack of universal applicability which we observe in the sphere of status also exists to some extent in the sphere of class. But, on the whole, class is much more general and pervasive.

It might be worthwhile now trying to draw this discussion together. On the Marxist view class is determined not by the way people value a

certain social position, but by the relations of production. It is divided into those who own the instruments of production and those who do not. This means in essence two classes, although others may be distinguished. Should a person think himself a member of the ruling class when in fact he is a worker then he is suffering from "false consciousness". No amount of subjective identification with another class can alter the objective facts of class as determined by the economic position. Yet we have produced other criteria of class apart from this economic one. We have emphasised birth and breeding as indicators of class deriving from the aristocratic period and we have emphasised education as an indicator of class deriving from the present period, although, of course, a certain type of education harks back to breeding and to aristocratic values. We have indicated that class today involves an amalgam of these various factors. Indeed, so complex are these factors that T. H. Marshall has argued that class is ultimately how people treat one another.

But at the same time we have suggested that in any case class, as a concept deriving from economic relationships, in conditions of scarcity, is giving way to the more subtle concept of status which is appropriate to conditions of affluence and relative economic equality. People are being pushed closer together socially and they are attempting to maintain their position by a particular style of life by differentiating themselves in minute particulars from other groups. In such a situation society fragments into a whole series of status groups not necessarily connected with each other in any organic, continuous fashion. The chief bases on which they are distinguishable is by the way in which background, education and social experience enter into the style of living which they choose. In so far as class still enters into it then maybe the Middle Class progressively swallows up the working class, until in the end one has a series of competing status groups within an almost entirely middle class society.

Perhaps some final comments are in order with respect to this final point about the extent to which the Middle Class swallows up the working class: in other words the process of embourgeoisement. Many sociologists (not necessarily Marxists) hotly dispute the importance of embourgeoisement.

Let us look at three areas of possible embourgeoisement: income, identification and life style. As regards income the older pyramid is now shaped like a vase with a thin long upper tube, a small lower base and

an enormous middle concentration in the upper (skilled) working class and lower (clerical) middle class. Those at the base are suffering less from the poor remuneration of their occupations than (say) widowhood, or the partial inadequacy of pensions or just inability to cope. The average wage is about £ 1000, and the proportions above £ 3000 tail off very rapidly say 1½ % of the population, quite apart that is from the incidence of taxation, which becomes super-tax round about £ 5000 a year. Thus at least three-quarters of the population will be within the income range £ 750 - £ 2500 a year. Capital of course is a different matter: it is estimated that some 40 % of the capital wealth is owned by 1 % of the population.

This however does not imply a bourgeois identity on the part of the prosperous worker in spite of his probably owning a car. He probably still votes for the Labour Party. Moreover that large section of the working class voting Conservative (over 1/3) has *always* done so. Similarly that large section of the working class which votes Labour and yet has attitudes on nationalisation*, migration etc., very much to the right of the party has always been present: it is not augmented by affluence. So affluence does not affect "identity" any more than it affects indicators of identity like speech, apart that is from those people channelled upwards by the educational system, largely from the skilled rather than the semi-skilled working class*.

The same considerations apply to life style and in this respect the most useful indicator is housing. The traditional working class has either lived in poor quality urban housing or in "council estates" owned by local authorities and let out at low rates. The council estates have enormously increased, partly destroying the close knit character of working class life in the older type of urban areas, *but* there has been only a minor tendency towards the middle class pattern of personal ownership of semi-detached houses bought on a mortgage. Indeed, it is this middle class pattern which is altering, away from "house and garden" to the large blocks of "town houses" in which the separateness of older middle class styles is partly broken down. This development also indicates a division within the middle class, between traditionalists and progressives, thus providing one further illustration of choice as a partial determinant

*) Only 1/3 of Labour voters favour nationalisation of Steel.

*) The Plowden Report recommends the diversion of special resources to schools in areas of the semi-skilled working class.

of style and of discontinuities even at roughly the same status level in life-styles and in attitudes, even attitudes towards politics and social problems. As the conservative party so often laments: there are large areas of the professional class (as distinct from the commercial middle class) on which it can by no means rely for support. Let it further be said that the "working class Tory", either one who votes Conservative or who is Conservative in his attitudes, remains the despair of the professional middle class Socialist!
