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The Upper Classes

Property and privilege in Britain

John Scott

Department of Sociology, University of Leicester

M

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To my parents, and to Jill, Michael, and Susan

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J.S.

Preface

The upper classes in Britain have been unduly neglected in both social research and everyday social imagery. Public opinion tends to reject the relevance of the language of class and to equate such notions as 'upper class' with the remnants of the old peerage. Though such terms as 'working class' and 'middle class' may grudgingly be accepted as having some reference to reality, the prevailing image of the social hierarchy takes on a somewhat truncated form with a 'bottom' and a 'middle' but no top. Social class has, quite rightly, been treated as a central explanatory factor by both sociologists and social historians. But their researches have focused almost exclusively on the working class, a focus dictated by the key assumptions of the Marxian problematic which has structured much of this research. Studies of working-class images of society and political consciousness have recently been complemented by studies of the working class in the labour process and have themselves complemented the older research on working-class patterns of kinship and sociability. Recent attempts to document the characteristics of the 'middle class' have done little to remedy the truncated popular image of society. This relative neglect reflects what might be termed the social anonymity of the privileged class of today. By contrast with the more opulent life-style of their predecessors the members of the dominant class today adopt a low profile and tend to define themselves simply as part of an extensive 'middle class'. Popular interpretations of the distribution of power in terms of 'the powers that be' or 'the establishment' have done little to destroy the anonymity of the privileged class.

The privileged members of society have, of course, figured in the traditional narrative historiography of the British constitution, which has emphasised the actions of kings and courtiers in the flux of politics. But there have been few attempts to place the actions of the kings and courtiers within a class frame of reference. The upper

classes have played a crucial role in British social development, and it is necessary to understand the actions of their leading representatives in the context of the overall balance of class forces. A major study which attempted to overcome this neglect of the upper class is, of course, that modern classic of sociological history written by Barrington Moore: *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Moore undertook comparative historical investigations in order to display the dynamics of class relations in social development, emphasising particularly the dialectic of lord and peasant in the making of modern society. It is unfortunate that so few writers have followed Moore's lead in the study of the upper classes.

The one area within which sociologists might have been expected to give some attention to the privileged classes has been the study of political power. But here the main explanatory concept has not been 'class' but 'elite'. To grace the notion of an elite with the word 'concept' may be something of an exaggeration, since the prevalence of elite studies is a pointer to the absence of any worked-out conceptualisation of the real significance of what is being studied. The problems of the elite approach are by now well known: that formal position is not the same thing as actual power and that a common social background is not necessarily an indicator of similarity in policy preferences. But perhaps the fundamental difficulty of the approach lies in the abstractness and generality of the 'elite' notion itself, which originated as an ahistorical alternative to the more specific conceptions of alternative forms of class society. As a result it is generally unclear exactly what claims are being made by those who write about 'power elites' and 'political elites'. Unless the concrete social and political groups which participate in the exercise of power are related to the dynamics of class relations, any analysis remains empty and formal. Where attempts are made to incorporate such notions as 'upper class' into elite studies, this is generally reduced to one characteristic (such as public school education) and is rarely understood as relating to the differential structuring of life chances.

The aim of this book is to draw together the major sources of evidence on the upper classes in British social development and to locate this evidence in a class frame of reference. As such it is a provisional statement of a much larger project, the elaboration of

which requires the carrying-out of a great deal more theoretically oriented research into the perpetuation of privilege. In Chapter 1 some of the basic theoretical concepts are outlined and these are used to illustrate the structure of feudal stratification. Chapter 2 shows how the feudal baronage gradually gave way to a differentiation between landed magnates and landed gentry, and how the formation of both these groups was brought about by the development of capitalist agriculture. The bourgeoisie, which emerged in the towns to control the trade in agricultural products, became an increasingly powerful social class and joined the magnates and the gentry at the upper levels of privilege. By the eighteenth century, as shown in Chapter 3, a tripartite division into rentiers, farmers, and financiers had evolved, and the relationship between these groups determined the structure of the political problems of the period. With the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century a new group of capitalist manufacturers rose to prominence, and Chapter 4 shows how this group introduced new practices of work and supervision and began to extend its influence at the national level. In Chapter 5 it is argued that the three major privileged classes – based in land, commerce and industry – were moving closer together and were increasingly adopting a gentlemanly life-style, the values and practices of this life-style coming to structure their patterns of political participation. Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 show how the economic trends of the twentieth century brought about the formation of a unified business class, still headed by a gentlemanly establishment, which owes its continued existence to its ability to manage the monopoly enterprises of the modern economy. It is shown that the establishment is no longer able to function as the sole support of this system and that new forms of political practice have emerged for the representation of the interests of the business class.

April 1982
Leicester University

JOHN SCOTT