

In a post-Marxist, post-modern world, class still matters

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35 matters in business and public service alike is performance. But class will out. The Neill Committee, for example, reporting on cleaning up public life, can take it as a basic assumption that honours and titles so retain their lustre that how they are allocated has to be policed as independently as possible. Those who talk with received pronunciation, from the Prime Minister to the chief executive of any company, are seen as possessing a natural authority, even while we refuse to accept that how we talk should have any legitimacy whatsoever.

40 This ambiguity over class runs very deep. The collapse of Marxism, as David Cannadine writes in his intriguing new book, *Class in Britain*, has meant that class has almost entirely been written out of the intellectual script. Historians no longer use class to explain the march of history, whether they are dealing with the English Civil War or the agitation for reform after the Napoleonic wars. Political philosophers have similarly abandoned the concept, while Marxist and quasi-Marxist sociology has imploded.

45 Post-modernism, in which all is relative, absolutes are out and disorder reigns, can find no place for class. David Beckham and Delia Smith are more significant than any representative from the old class hierarchy.

50 But, as Cannadine argues, the disappearance of class from intellectual discourse, when it is palpably alive as a

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85 social and psychological construct, is absurd. It may be true the Marxist class categories - *rentier*, capitalist and worker - were gross over-simplifications and that trying to explain all history as the history of class conflict has failed, but that does not mean that there was never any idea of class or that classes never existed. Nor does it mean that class has no relationship to economic functions - wages, rents and profits - or that the operation of economy and society is unaffected by the existence of class.

90 But if the Marxist categories no longer work, what does? Cannadine offers three conceptions. First, there is the idea of class as a hierarchy of status and rank - a kind of procession - which however mocked still carries on as we will witness with next week's State Opening of Parliament. Second, there is the idea of broad estates linked to economic and power functions - an elite, a professional managerial class, a mass of wage-earners and an underclass of underemployed and unemployed. And third, there is the more oppositional view of class with its Marxist roots - boss-class and the rest, them and us, the propertied and the proletariat.

125 What Cannadine argues is not that there is any one truth about class, but that the British move between these three concepts as circumstances and political moods change and have done so throughout the last 300 years.

130 What is different about

Britain, compared with other Western societies, is that because of the unique British experience - an industrial revolution but retaining a monarchical constitution - all three of these ideas of class capture an important dimension of British social reality. There is a hierarchy of status, encapsulated by which private school you attended, whether you own land, and the honours system.

140 These signals are divisive, but they are also curiously unifying - the recognition of the gradations allows us all to be members of the national community because we understand the nuances so well. But they are not the only criteria by which class is established.

150 But, equally, there is a clash between the interests of the propertied and proletariat. In some industries and firms, managers are aggressively profit-seeking and treat workers poorly, a short-termism that is distinctive about British capitalism. On top, there are also the great estates common to all Western industrialised societies - professional managers, organised labour, the self-employed and so on. It is not that one definition captures British reality - they all do

160 This array of class distinctions is, however, disabling, it is unfair. It is not meritocratic. It undercuts the dynamism of British society because so much status can still be ascribed through birth, accent and education. Above all, it limits the British imagination, and that, in turn, circumscribes and defines the British business establishment's attitude towards risk and entrepreneurship.

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170 New Labour proclaims that it is an enemy of old ideas of class; its third-way ideology means it wants an end both to class defined by the confrontation between capital and labour and class defined by flummery, honours and lordships. Gordon Brown wears a suit to the Mansion House while insisting that capital must serve the many, not the few; Tony Blair is adamant about House of Lords reform; Peter Mandelson is enraptured by the dynamism of classless American capitalism, an enthusiasm he shares with Blair and Brown.

180 But to want the end demands willing the means, and here New Labour becomes more hesitant - or at least so far. As Cannadine argues, if we want to lose the more disabling ideas of class (we can never lose class altogether - it's a feature of all capitalist societies), then we need to abolish titles, establish a less hidebound monarchy and incorporate private schools into the state system. This would be the route to the more classless society, along with American-style economic and social dynamism that New Labour craves.

190 But does it have the bottle? It has certainly begun with the House of Lords. Maybe, just maybe, its convictions will carry it in more radical directions than any of us suspect. Class, after all, still matters.