

Stratification: that's the name of the game and each generation they play the same

Abstract

I begin by quoting a famous comedy sketch on social class from The Frost Report of 1966. It involved a very tall John Cleese, a medium sized Ronnie Barker and a diminutive Ronnie Corbett. I wonder who knows or remembers it. Yes, even in 1966 it was a simplification but I use it here as a kind of icebreaker for thinking about class and privilege. We can guess the different types of school to which each of these people went.

Among my endnotes, if you are interested and prepared to engage with my beliefs and values, you may see evidence of my disgust for politicians who are prepared to accept donations from the profiteers of ethnic cleansing by countries that are in breach not only of international law but also of the conventions of common humanity. Such politicians are also very willing to reward these profiteers with peerages that enable them to participate in making legislation that affects negatively the disabled, unhoused, unemployed, exploited, alienated and commodified but affects positively those we may classify as the 'haves'.

Main text

'I look down on him because I am upper-class.'

'I look up to him because he is upper-class; but I look down on him because he is lower-class. I am middle-class.'

'I know my place. I look up to them both. But I don't look up to him as much as I look up to him, because he has got innate breeding.'

'I have got innate breeding but I have not got any money. So sometimes I look up to him.'

'I still look up to him because, although I have money, I am vulgar. But I am not as vulgar as him so I still look down on him.'

'I know my place. I look up to them both; but while I am poor I am honest, industrious and trustworthy. Had I the inclination I could look down on them. But I don't.'

'We all know our place but what do we get out of it?'

'I get a feeling of superiority over them'.

'I get a feeling of inferiority from him but a feeling of superiority over him'.

'I get a pain in the back of my neck'.

This was how social classes were portrayed in a famous comedy sketch of 1966 (The Frost Report)¹. Even then social stratification was more complicated than it was popularly portrayed, though we can easily picture the three different kinds of schools attended by the people of these classes. Today we are getting closer to

a break up and re-ordering or, worse, a disordering of an increasingly dysfunctional society that will at first appear to benefit the already privileged but actually do widespread and long-term damage even, I believe, to the super rich and privileged as their social bubble becomes smaller and smaller while their distance from the rest of society becomes greater and greater. Education policy, particularly in England, will contribute to this.

There have been attempts to reduce the number of strata, narrow the gaps between them or even eliminate them completely. Politicians attempting to do this have, in the past, been called progressive and the word 'reform' applied to their policies. We only have to recall the abolition of slavery, the factory acts, the introduction of compulsory schooling, the extension of the franchise, the introduction of National Insurance and old age pensions, the establishment of the National Health Service, the introduction of the Open University and, to the credit of Margaret Thatcher whose party would rather like it to be forgotten, the comprehensivisation of secondary schools: all progressive and reforming policies that emerged and were introduced and implemented after much proper political activity generating general consent.

The champions of such policies are celebrated as having reduced inequality and increased social fairness. The opponents of such policies have, except when they have somehow managed to capture and distort the discourse as first New Labour and then the Coalition have done, been regarded as defenders of privilege, rather like those members of the House of Lords called 'the last ditchers' who fought to the end to prevent the passing of the Parliament Act of 1911 and the curtailment of the power of the unelected over the electedⁱⁱ. And it is worth reminding ourselves that the 1911 Parliament Act was in response to Tory aristocratic unwillingness to accept Liberal Party sponsored progress towards increased social equality, even towards mere social justice. In July 2012 Tories were again reluctant to accept progress towards a democratically accountable House of Lordsⁱⁱⁱ.

The present Coalition government would, I am sure, hate to be shown to be advocates for the reversal of progressive, reforming policies, introducing yet further social stratification and reinforcing a class system preserving, even promoting, privilege for some at the expense of others. They would hate even more to be perceived as socially destructive. After all, the name of the Conservative Party implies the maintenance of a kind of socially structural stability, albeit one that favours the favoured. But, despite the theft and misuse of words such as *reform*, *modernisation* and *progress* to present their policies^{iv}, that is exactly what I believe they are doing and what they are. Slowing down, perverting and, when possible, reversing progress towards equality is the entire purpose of Conservatism. The difference from the Frost Report of 1966 is that an analysis of social structure could no longer use just three main, clear-cut categories of people who are sure of their place. Indeed, knowing or wanting to know your place in society by reference to old class certainties seems so strange in these days of instant celebrity culture: of people who, in the words of Kitty Muggage (niece of Beatrice Webb)^v, rose without trace. Interestingly, it was David (later elevated to Sir David) Frost of the Frost Report to whom she was referring.

Yes we are stratified. Yes privilege accompanies power. And yes the distance between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is widening. But, as I have argued throughout this series of essays, the ultimate danger is not simply the growing gap between rich and poor: it is Social Fracking that will do for us.

Questions for critical conversations

1. Do educators ever think about their schools, colleges and universities and their pupils, students and colleagues in terms of social class?
2. Is social class reflected in the educational system?
3. If social class is evident in the educational system how might that affect what is taught and how and what is assessed and how?

Notes, references and links

In order to critique the above you may find the following link useful.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.doc>

ⁱ <http://s220.photobucket.com/user/Toxic-Web/media/frost-report-class-sketch.mp4.html>

ⁱⁱ The 1911 Parliament Act does not feature very much in school history books these days. I think that it and its successor, the 1949 Parliament Act, were very important. Each was opposed strongly by the Tory Party, particularly those who were members of the House of Lords. When those acts were passed the House of Lords was composed mostly of hereditary peers plus some Law Lords and bishops. The word 'aristocracy' was the appropriate word for its members. Curtailing its power to over ride the decisions of the elected representatives of the people was essential if we were to make any pretence of being a democracy.

The following link illustrates the feelings of one of the 'ditchers'.

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseoflords/house-of-lords-reform/from-the-collections/from-the-parliamentary-collections-the-parliament-act/max-tilney-letter/>

ⁱⁱⁱ In his autobiography *In the Corridors of Power* (2012) David Lipsey (now Lord Lipsey of Tooting Bec) makes a strong case for the value of the House of Lords as a revising chamber carrying out the essential task of examining in detail legislation proposed by the House of Commons, detail being rather important. He points out that the Lords contains a lot of usefully knowledgeable and able people like him. His is a point that is often made by defenders of the House of Lords.

However, neither of the parties in our coalition government actually won the last general election (does that not matter?). David Cameron has, consequently, made up for his deficiency in House of Commons numbers by packing the House of Lords with his supporters, making peers at a faster rate than any of his predecessors.

It cannot be good to give a peerage to someone who makes money from ethnic cleansing even if that person does give millions to the Conservative Party and so boosts its chances of passing legislation. Obtaining, exercising and retaining power are clearly a set of priorities that overwhelm any consideration of the rights of indigenous people in Palestine. Unlike the JCB Company Palestinians do not donate to the Conservative Party

and I know of none that have been given peerages or went to the same school as David Cameron.

For my take on a company that not only profits from ethnic cleansing but also gives a cut from those profits to Cameron's Conservative Party and obtains a peerage in return you might like to click on the following. There is a lot more if you are interested.

<http://jewssansfrontieres.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/british-company-jcb-and-ethnic.html>

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/08/party-funding-scandal-david-cameron-conservatives>

For an account of the latest attempt to reform the House of Lords the following link might be helpful.

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN06405/house-of-lords-reform-bill-201213-decision-not-to-proceed>

^{iv} Capturing educational concepts and controlling their definition is now automatic for governments. I discuss this in several places on this website. You might find the following link useful if you are interested in how educational policy has been formed (mostly in England) since approximately 1945 and, to some extent, the part played by language and discourse.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebFor%20DH%20Lawrence.pdf>

^v Thinking of Beatrice Webb and her husband Sydney stimulates the mind to imagine a late nineteenth century London when the London School of Economics and Political Science was being formed by people with an urge to tackle social inequality and injustice. A time when the plays of George Bernard Shaw cleverly articulated socialist values and drew witty attention to the powers and contradictions of privilege. A time not long after the death of Karl Marx when his ideas not only provided momentum for revolutionary movements but also stimulus for so many writers, artists, philosophers, campaigners and educators who were constructing a coherent belief in public service and social justice.

I did use the word 'imagine' and I am aware of the power of imagination to over simplify. You might, therefore, as a corrective to my imaginings, wish to look at David Cannadine's *Class in Britain* (1998 and 2000, Penguin). There must be thousands of books and articles about class but Cannadine provides perspectives not, I think, used before.