

RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

Beyond Class?¹

Social Structures and Social Perceptions in Modern England

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GEORGE ORWELL ONCE FAMOUSLY DESCRIBED England as ‘the most class-ridden country under the sun’—a remark of such global reach in its comparative implications that it seems unlikely ever to be subjected to appropriately cosmic testing, let alone empirical verification.² Nevertheless, there are many people in England today, and also many living abroad, who are inclined to accept Orwell’s remark as being broadly correct. But what did Orwell mean, and what do most people mean, when they think of English society in this way? After all, the extremes of wealth and poverty in England are no greater than in other nations: compared with the United States, the English rich are not as rich, nor the English poor as poor. In many measurable ways—economic, social, and political—England is *not* a uniquely inegalitarian society. But what *is* different, and here Orwell was surely right, is that the English, unlike the Americans, constantly think and talk about these inequalities, and they do so very largely in class terms.³ Yet they do not think and talk about these class terms

¹ J. Alt, ‘Beyond Class: The Decline of Industrial Labor and Leisure’, *Teleos*, xxviii (1976), 55–80; P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 1–2, 23; R. J. Morris, ‘Class’ in J. Cannon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to British History* (Oxford, 1997), p. 217: ‘Social class has lost its privileged position in the narrative of British social history’.

² G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 152. The essay was originally published in 1941.

³ P. Gottschalk and T. M. Smeeding, ‘Cross-National Comparisons of Earnings and Income Inequality’, *Journal of Economic Literature*, xxxv (1997), 633–87; M. J. Burke, *The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America* (Chicago, 1995).

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rigorously or consistently, either as categories into which people are put, themselves included, or as models of English society as whole. They are very aware of class, and very conscious of class—but in very un-self-aware, very un-self-conscious ways.⁴

This is well borne out in Orwell's rather confused and uncertain account of England's social structure set out in his wartime essay: *The Lion and the Unicorn*. In one guise, wearing his venerable Tory hat, he saw it in hierarchical terms, as a traditional, layered, society of exceptional complexity, 'bound together by an invisible chain'. In another, and as befitted the offspring of an imperial and professional family, he envisaged England as divided between the upper, middle, and lower classes, with the middle class being much the most important. From yet a third perspective, that of the socialist revolutionary, he believed that English society was riven by one deep, fundamental cleavage, between 'the rich', the 'moneyed classes' and the 'ruling class' on one side, and 'the poor', the 'common people', and the 'mass of the people' on the other—those whom he hoped would soon rise up and overthrow their masters.⁵ For someone who was so sensitive towards (and guilty about) the many nuances of social status and distinctions of social identity, these are curiously—but significantly—discrepant ways of seeing and describing what was, after all, the same single, unitary social world.⁶

Orwell's contradictory account of England as being simultaneously a hierarchical, a triadic, and a polarised society provides an appropriate starting point for the study of social structures and social perceptions from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. For the best way of reconciling these contradictions is to suggest that he was depicting and describing an England of shifting social perceptions and multiple social identities which helpfully, if inadvertently, anticipate the post-modern world we inhabit today. But our post-modern world is also a post-Marxist world, from which the once-appealing master narrative of class formation, class conflict, class consciousness, and class dominance, a narrative which effortlessly elided social structures, social

⁴ For a sampling of recent works on the subject, see: P. Saunders, *Unequal But Fair? A Study of Class Barriers in Britain* (London, 1996); R. Marris, *How to Save the Underclass* (London, 1996); D. J. Lee and B. S. Turner (eds.), *Conflicts About Class* (London, 1996); Lord Bauer, *Class on the Brain: The Cost of a British Obsession* (London, 1997); S. Brook, *Class: Knowing Your Place in Modern Britain* (London, 1997); A. Adonis and S. Pollard, *A Class Act: The Myth of Britain's Classless Society* (London, 1997).

⁵ Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, pp. 40–5, 48–9, 51–3, 55–6, 66–7, 70, 77–8, 81–3, 102, 106, 109.

⁶ It is surely not coincidence that these are the same three ways of envisioning the social order as had been followed by an anonymous citizen of Montpellier in 1768. See R. Darnton, 'A Bourgeois Puts His World in Order' in idem, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985), pp. 107–43. Indeed, it may well be that what is unusual about twentieth-century England is that all three models of social description remain plausibly available and widely used to a greater extent than anywhere else in western society. Perhaps this is what Orwell meant—or should have meant.

perceptions and social (and political) action, has long since been dethroned.⁷ 'Class dismissed' is the mode and the mood in which history is now being written, not just in England, but throughout the west, and there have been considerable gains as a result, among them the recognition that social structures, social perceptions and social (and political) actions cannot be thus easily and effortlessly elided any more.⁸

To the extent that this means the history of modern England can no longer be built around the grand, heroic Marxist simplicities of class-formation, class-consciousness and class-conflict, as the essential means whereby these structures, perceptions and actions are connected, animated, unified, and realised, this seems both convincing and correct. But this should not mean, and does not mean, that all that remains are the random incoherence and 'chaotic authenticity' of past events.⁹ Put more positively, we are left with the recognition that social structures, social perceptions, and social (and political) actions are interconnected in much more nuanced and contingent ways than it was once fashionable to suppose, and that (as Orwell unintentionally made plain half a century ago) social perceptions and social identities are multiple rather than single.¹⁰ In the course of this lecture, I hope to borrow from and build on these insights, so as to sketch out, in a necessarily schematic and simplified way, a general approach to the study of social structures and social perceptions in modern England which tries to rise to the most pressing challenge facing historians today: the re-instatement of master narrative, but a master narrative built around multiple rather than single identities.

Here are two final points by way of preliminary. The first is to note that if we take the long view of England's social structure from the early eighteenth century to the late twentieth, one of its most conspicuous features has been its slow rate of change. At a very abstract level, we can borrow Lord Runciman's

⁷ For valuable summaries of these developments, see: R. Price, 'Historiography, Narrative and the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxv (1996), 220–56; J. Thompson, 'After the Fall: Class and Political Language in Britain, 1780–1900', *Historical Journal*, xxxix (1996), 785–806; C. Kent, 'Victorian Social History: Post-Thompson, Post-Foucault, Post-Modern', *Victorian Studies*, xl (1996), 97–134.

⁸ For two excellent wide-ranging surveys, see A. Knight, 'Revisionism and Revolution: Mexico Compared to England and France', *Past & Present*, no. 134 (1992), 158–79; T. C. W. Blanning (ed.), *The Rise and Fall of the French Revolution* (London, 1996). For three recent attempts to write about 'great' revolutions, which stress contingency and accident rather than long term social trends and class formation, see C. Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990); S. Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London, 1989); O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London, 1997).

⁹ Schama, *Citizens*, p. xvi.

¹⁰ J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870–1914* (Oxford, 1993), p. 8; D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–18*, (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 10–16.

recent typology, and agree that over this span of three hundred years, English society has been characterised by four broad systactic categories: by a small elite; by a larger group of managers, businessmen and professionals; by the general body of workers; and by a deprived and impoverished underclass.¹¹ In their occupational categories and relative proportions, these systacts have remained very much the same across the last three centuries of English history, whatever else may have been changing, and this general analysis gets ample statistical validation at the hands of W. D. Rubinstein, N. F. R. Crafts, and Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson, who have recently been examining England's wealth and occupational structure from 1688 to the twentieth century.¹² Of course, these historians have been working with different data and different categories of social taxonomy, but their basic message is essentially the same.

Indeed, it has been the establishment of this long-durational picture of the slowly changing pattern of wealth and occupational distribution which has done most in recent years to subvert the Marxist or *Marxisant* belief that the historical process was driven inexorably forward by the economically-determined dynamic of class formation, class consciousness and class conflict. For it now seems generally accepted that social groups tied directly to what was only a gradually changing mode of production could not have come into being, struggled, risen and fallen in this simple, adversarial, apocalyptic manner.¹³ More precisely, if economic and social structures have evolved in modern England at such a leisurely pace, then it is small wonder that efforts to depict the aristocracy as having been overthrown between 1832–46 were unconvincing; that the middle classes were always described as rising, but never arrived anywhere; and that the working class was no more 'made' in the first third of the nineteenth century than it was 're-made' during the last

¹¹ W. G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory*, vol. ii, *Substantive Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 108.

¹² W. D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain Since the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1981); P. H. Lindert, 'English Occupations, 1670–1811', *Journal of Economic History*, xl (1980), 685–712; idem, 'Unequal English Wealth since 1670', *Journal of Political Economy*, xciv (1986), 1127–62; P. H. Lindert and J. G. Williamson, 'Revising England's Social Tables, 1688–1812', *Explorations in Economic History*, xix (1982), 385–408; idem, 'Reinterpreting Britain's Social Tables, 1688–1913', *Explorations in Economic History*, xx (1983), 94–109; N. F. R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth During the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 1–8, 48–70.

¹³ W. Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Europe: A Critique of Historical Understanding* (New York, 1987); W. H. Sewell, jr., 'How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation', in H. J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 50–77; P. Curry, 'Towards a Post-Marxist Social History: Thompson, Clark and Beyond', in A. Wilson (ed.), *Rethinking Social History: English Society 1570–1920 and Its Interpretation* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 158–200.

quarter. This is not, it now seems, the way in which things in the English past have happened.¹⁴

But we also need to remember—and this is the second and final preliminary remark—that contemporaries did not understand or visualise their society, their social structure, and their place within it in the sort of sophisticated analytical and descriptive categories recently provided by Lord Runciman or by Professor Crafts—a point well borne out by the fact that none of Orwell's three impressionistic models of English society can be easily reconciled with the four rigorous systacts of Runciman's version. Still less did they (and do they) envisage their world in those complex, contradictory, disputed and increasingly arcane taxonomies so beloved of many British sociologists.¹⁵ These were not (and are not) the conventional concepts or vernacular categories of English social self-understanding—concepts and categories which were less quantified and more varied, but which, nevertheless, provided people with the necessary and adequate means to understand their social world, to situate themselves within it, and to navigate their way through it.¹⁶ It is with these commonplace social perceptions and multiple social identities—to all of which the word class is these days most frequently and ubiquitously applied—that I am concerned. What were (and are) they, and when, how and why have they altered (or not altered) during the last three centuries?

* * *

My starting point is one of provocative but (I hope) plausible simplicity: namely that during the past three hundred years, there have been only three basic descriptions of England's social structure that have been generally available to the population at large, to pundits and pamphleteers, and to the politicians. Moreover, the models in question are precisely those which George

¹⁴ M. Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 43 (1997), 155–76; R. I. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990); A. J. Reid, 'Class and Organisation', *Historical Journal*, xxx (1987), 225–38; idem, *Social Classes and Social Relations in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁵ G. Marshall, H. Newby, D. Rose, and C. Vogler, *Social Class in Modern Britain* (London, 1988); G. Marshall and J. Goldthorpe, 'The Promising Future of Class Analysis', *Sociology*, xxvi (1992), 381–400; R. E. Pahl, 'Does Class Analysis without Class Theory Have Promising Future?: A Reply to Goldthorpe and Marshall', *Sociology*, xvii (1993), 253–8. For some valuable comments (and criticisms) of British sociologists' continued obsession with class, see S. Ringen, 'The Open Society and the Closed Mind', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 January 1997, p. 6.

¹⁶ I must stress that this lecture is concerned with England, rather than with the United Kingdom, the British Isles, or the greater Britain beyond the seas. For a broader 'British' treatment of what is here discussed as an 'English' subject, and for fuller documentation and development of the arguments, see D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 1998).

Orwell had outlined for inter-war England: the hierarchical view of society as a seamless web; the triadic version with upper, middle, and lower collective groups; and the adversarial picture of society polarised between 'us' and 'them'. Indeed, the continued co-existence of these three models may be traced back at least to the late medieval period, when English society was variously viewed as an integrated hierarchy, or as the three estates of warriors, priests and workers, or as divided between landowners and peasants.¹⁷ More than half a millennium on, little seems to have altered. When A. H. Halsey recently set out to revise his justly influential book on social structures and social change in twentieth-century Britain, he felt obliged to choose between 'the vulgar Marxist theory of two classes at war', 'the simplification of three social strata of social classes', and 'the vulgar liberal conception of a continuous hierarchy of prestige or status'.¹⁸ As this suggests, the language in which these three 'vulgar' or 'simplified' versions of our social structure and social identities have been articulated may have evolved and developed across the centuries, but in their essential form, the models themselves have remained remarkably constant and unchanging.

The hierarchical picture of English society, which derived from the Elizabethan notion of a 'great chain of being' and its medieval precursors, took it for granted that each individual had an allotted place in the divinely pre-ordained order of things. From the monarch, via the five grades of peerage, the baronetcy, and the gentry, then on to the differentially-ranked professions, and finally reaching down to the yeoman and agricultural labourers and the poor beneath, this unbroken line of close, personalised connection descended. Here was the social fabric understood as a seamless web of infinite, individualistic gradations, where obedience, subordination and deference were the natural attitudes and essential values which underlay the whole structure.¹⁹ Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and much of

¹⁷ T. E. Powell, 'The "Three Orders" of Society in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, xxiii (1994), 103–32; G. Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago, 1980); R. H. Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History* (London, 1985), pp. 114–19, 122–3, 152–5, 164, 217–25, 246–52; D. A. L. Morgan, 'The Individual Style of the English Gentleman', in M. Jones (ed.), *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 16–17; M. H. Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348–1500* (London, 1990), pp. 1–24; D. Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000–1300* (London, 1992), pp. 15–38, 41–4, 344–7. See also the very suggestive essays in R. Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1994), by G. L. Harriss, K. Mertes, R. Horrox, D. M. Palliser, and M. Bailey.

¹⁸ A. H. Halsey, *Change in British Society* (4th edn., Oxford, 1995), p. 144.

¹⁹ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1943); A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936); W. F. Bynum, 'The Great Chain of Being After Forty Years', *History of Science*, xiii (1975), 1–28; D. Cressey, 'Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England', *Literature and History*, iii (1976), 29–44.

the twentieth centuries, this providentially-ordained view survived and flourished as the most popular and resonant way of envisaging the social structure and social identities of England. Every major politician, from Pitt to Salisbury, believed that it was their prime task to preserve this ranked, stable, social order, and as late as the 1950s, Winston Churchill still envisaged the English social world in these traditional, hierarchical terms.²⁰

The second way of conceiving English society and English social identities was in three collective groups: not the medieval estates of warriors, priests, and workers, but as upper, middling, and lower. As Keith Wrightson has persuasively argued, this alternative vision of the people gradually developed during the seventeenth century, and by the eighteenth century, this triadic model was widely used. In 1776, it received its famous and more rigorous formulation at the hands of Adam Smith, who in *The Wealth of Nations* divided British society into what he called the three great and constituent 'orders': those who lived on rents, those who lived by profits, and those who earned wages in exchange for their labour.²¹ Ever since, this three-stage model has furnished an exceptionally appealing guide to English society, especially for those who placed themselves in the middle—sometimes in the confident belief that their numbers were increasing and their circumstances improving, sometimes out of fear that their position was getting worse. 'I am always hearing', Harold Macmillan once observed as Prime Minister, 'about the middle classes. What is it they really want?' Since the early eighteenth century, this question has been regularly posed and sometimes answered. Either way, it presumes this same triadic, collective view of English society.²²

²⁰ J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 93–118, 216–35; G. F. A. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851–75* (London, 1971), pp. xv–xvi; F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (London, 1988), pp. 152–3, 173–4, 177, 181–2, 193–6, 360–1; P. Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front, 1900–1955* (London, 1992), pp. 47, 211, 311–15; I. Berlin, 'Mr Churchill in 1940', in H. Hardy and R. Hausheer (eds.), *Isaiah Berlin: The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London, 1997), pp. 609, 612, 619, 621, 625.

²¹ K. Wrightson, 'Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England', in P. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 30–52; idem, '“Sorts of People” in Tudor and Stuart England', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 28–51; idem, 'The Social Order of Early Modern England: Three Approaches', in L. Bonfield *et al.* (eds.), *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure: Essays Presented to Peter Laslett on His Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 178–84; A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, with W. B. Todd, 2 vols., Oxford, 1976), vol. i, p. 265; vol. ii, pp. 423, 714.

²² A. Briggs, 'Middle-Class Consciousness in English Politics, 1780–1846', *Past & Present*, no. 9 (1956), 65–74; D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995); A. Horne, *Harold Macmillan*, vol. ii, 1957–1986 (New York, 1989), p. 62.

The third version of the social order posits a simple, fundamental fissure between two large and antagonistic groups. This was how many contemporaries had come to envisage and understand the Civil War, when hierarchy collapsed and the English social fabric was rent in twain.²³ And although it was subsequently stitched together again, gaps and fissures remained. By the eighteenth century, it was commonplace to see society as divided between the great, the quality, the nobles, the gentry on the one side, and the poor, the rabble, the mob, the lower orders, or ‘the people’ on the other.²⁴ During the early nineteenth century, Cobbett depicted a nation polarised between ‘the People’ and ‘the Thing’, and it was this same manichean social vision which lay behind the agitation and the debates surrounding the Great Reform Bill and Chartism. The struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or capital and labour, which Marx and Engels mistakenly tried to universalise, was but another version of the same dichotomous model, albeit the most elaborate and influential.²⁵ And as Patrick Joyce and Richard Hoggart have argued, the idea that England is split between a virtuous and downtrodden ‘us’ and a corrupt, self-seeking ‘them’ has resonated widely since Cobbett’s time, well on into twentieth-century popular culture and popular politics.²⁶

Of course, none of these vernacular visions and identities amount to what the late Ernest Gellner would have called ‘real social knowledge’.²⁷ The hierarchical view was originally elaborated to do better justice to a late-medieval society which was more complex and diverse than that depicted by the three medieval orders of warriors, clergy, and workers. But the idea that *everybody*—whatever their income, occupation, or status or location—could

²³ D. Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985), p. 40, where he describes the Civil War as the result of ‘two quite different constellations of social, political and cultural forces’: ‘on the one side stood those who had put their trust in the traditional conception of the harmonious, vertically-integrated society . . . On the other stood those . . . who wished to emphasise the moral and cultural distinctions which marked them off from their poorer, less disciplined neighbours.’

²⁴ Corfield, ‘Class by Name and Number’, in idem (ed.), *Language, History and Class*, pp. 117–18; Wrightson, ‘“Sorts of People”’, pp. 34–40; N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), p. 340; K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 287.

²⁵ For an early discussion of Marx as a special case of a more general formulation of social analysis, see R. Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (London, 1959), pp. 136–7, 245. I am also much indebted to an unpublished paper by G. Stedman Jones, ‘The Rise and Fall of “Class Struggle”: Middle Class and Bourgeoisie, 1789–1850’.

²⁶ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 56–65, 68–84, 245–55, 294–309; R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, 1957), pp. 62–6. Ironically, but unsurprisingly, it was often socially superior renegades from ‘them’ who provided the leadership and social vision for the socially inferior ‘us’: see J. Belchem and J. Epstein, ‘The Nineteenth-Century Gentleman Leader Revisited’, *Social History*, xxii (1997), 174–93.

²⁷ E. Gellner, ‘Knowledge of Nature and Society’, in M. Teich, R. Porter, and B. Gustaffsson (eds.), *Nature and Society in Historical Context* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 9–17.

be precisely placed in one single, all-embracing great chain of being was never wholly convincing. And if this was true for the fifteenth or sixteenth century, then how much more true was it two or three hundred years later, by which time society had become even more complex?²⁸ By the same token, and as the earlier abandonment of the three original medieval estates suggested, it was no less of an over-simplification to suppose that everyone could be shoehorned into three collective categories of landowners, capitalists, and labourers—categories which failed to recognise the increasing diversity of the economy, and which mistakenly presupposed that occupation was the single master key to social descriptions and social identities.²⁹ As for the notion that there was one single, great manachean divide: even the few examples presented here suggest that the line was drawn by different people at different times for different purposes; and in any case, whatever the gloomy prognostications that have been and still are sometimes made about the imminent likelihood of the fabric of English society being torn asunder, the fact is that this has not actually happened at any time during the last three hundred years.

In short, these three versions of the social structure might best be characterised as over-simplified rhetorical constructions—as *imagined* versions of the social order, or as what George Eliot memorably described as ‘picture writing of the mind’.³⁰ Consider, in this regard, Mr Gladstone. In one guise, he was an ‘out and out inequalitarian’, with an ‘hierarchical cast of mind’, who saw the supreme task of political management as to maintain an orderly, ranked society where everyone knew their place. In another, he was the proud product of the Liverpool middle classes, and one part of him always accepted their triadic view of society. From yet a third perspective, he came to see the nation as split between ‘the classes’ and ‘the masses’, in one stark, great divide.³¹ Or consider John Major, who in this context, if perhaps no other, may be spoken of in the same breath as the Grand Old Man himself. As the head of a government which defended hereditary peers in the House of Lords and insisted that the taxpayer should finance a new royal yacht, he

²⁸ For an incisive critique of hierarchy as being a way of seeing society, rather than ‘real social knowledge’, see P. N. Furbank, *Unholy Pleasure: The Idea of Social Class* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 75–83.

²⁹ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, vol. ii, pp. 181–2; N. T. Phillipson, ‘Adam Smith as Civic Moralist’ in I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 191; R. A. Houston, *Social Change in the Age of Enlightenment: Edinburgh, 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 19–20; R. Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1990 edn.), pp. 53–4.

³⁰ G. Watson, *The English Ideology* (London, 1973), p. 181; M. C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848–1874* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 11.

³¹ H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 3–5, 26, 29, 34–5, 53, 122–3, 130, 210; R. Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London, 1995), pp. ix, 406, 426; P. F. Clarke, *A Question of Leadership: Gladstone to Thatcher* (London, 1991), pp. 34–5; J. P. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian England* (London, 1993), pp. 249, 296, 302.

emerged as a true conservative believer in the traditional, hierarchical social order. As the politician who talked of ‘middle England’ in terms of cricket grounds and old ladies pedalling to Holy Communion, he envisaged society in tripartite terms. From a third perspective, he saw England as deeply divided, with the Tories on the side of ‘the people’ against entrenched elites, as with the ‘Citizen’s Charter’ and jibes about ‘New Labour, old school tie’.³² The phraseology may be new: but the three models of English society which they articulate have been around for a long time.

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But so what? It bears repeating that if we are to understand popular perceptions of the English social structure during the past three hundred years, we need to recognise the continued co-existence of these three very different ways of seeing and simplifying what was—and what is—in fact the same single society. Indeed, as the examples of George Orwell, Mr Gladstone, and John Major suggest, these three models do not just generally co-exist at a popular and political level: they specifically co-habit inside individual people’s heads. Yet they are very different, indeed discrepant, visions. The hierarchical picture sees society as a seamless web, regards people as individuals, and ranks them more according to status and prestige than occupation or income. The triadic version places people in collective groups, defines these collectivities largely in terms of their relation to the means of production (sometimes following Adam Smith, or sometimes following Karl Marx), assumes a certain degree of conflict over the surplus arising from their different economic activities, and gives most attention to those situated in ‘the middle’. And the dichotomous formulation, which envisages society as being in a state of perpetual tension between the ‘haves’ (variously defined) and the ‘have nots’ (ditto) is based on a mixture of economic, social, political, and sometimes cultural criteria. Thus regarded, these three descriptions are not only extreme over-simplifications of complex social structures and protean social identities: they scarcely amount to what Gordon Marshall calls ‘a rigorously consistent interpretation of the world’.³³

On the contrary, they are, in their purest form, discrepant to the point of irreconcilability. For there is a substantial difference between seeing English society as an individualistic and providentially-ordained great chain of being; or as dominated by the middle class rather than by the aristocracy above or the workers beneath; or as adversarially polarised between two homogeneous

³² P. Junor, *The Major Enigma* (London, 1993), pp. 53–4, 60, 85, 112–14, 146–7, 176–7, 254; H. Young, ‘The Prime Minister’, in D. Kavanagh and A. Seldon (eds.), *The Major Effect* (London, 1994), p. 22; W. Rees-Mogg, ‘Class politics is below the salt’, *The Times*, 14 October 1996; R. Harris, ‘And is there honey still for Tory tea?’, *The Sunday Times*, 23 February 1997.

³³ Marshall *et al.*, *Social Class in Modern Britain*, p. 187.

collectivities. Throughout his long career, Gladstone was never fully able to reconcile the fact that he was a conservative believer in the established order, a liberal embodiment of middle class views, and a crusading populist on the side of the ordinary people against the 'upper ten'. And it is these same contradictions in social perceptions and social philosophies which fissure the Tory Party today: is it neo-conservative hierarchical, or neo-liberal triadic, or neo-populist dichotomous in its view of English society?³⁴ One of the more remarkable aspects of the Conservative Party during the twentieth century (at least before 1 May 1997) has been its capacity to extend its social vision, to great electoral advantage, without the accompanying contradictions becoming too debilitatingly apparent: beginning with the traditional, landed hierarchical view; augmenting this with the middle-class triadic version; and more recently adding the populist confrontationalist approach.³⁵ Whether these very different social visions can be reconciled indefinitely, only time will tell.

These three vernacular views of English society and social identities have been abiding, resonant, and (at least conceptually) incompatible. One indication of this is that many historians of modern England, who have ostensibly been depicting national society as a whole, have in practice been doing little more than replicate one or other of these mutually-exclusive contemporary accounts. Consider the eighteenth century by way of illustration. Those who learn about Hanoverian England from the writings of Messrs Laslett, Perkin, Cannon, and Clark would see it as hierarchical, dominated by the traditional elite, from which the rest of society descended in ordered and stable ranks.³⁶ But those who learn about it from Messrs Holmes, Borsay, Brewer, and Langford would derive a very different version: in which the dominant and driving force was the middle class, the 'polite and commercial people', by comparison with whom neither the aristocracy, nor the working population, counted for anything like so much.³⁷ And there is yet a third manner in which

³⁴ For an early discussion of the contradictions between neo-conservatives and neo-liberals, see F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago, 1960), pp. 402–3. For a more recent critique, see J. Gray, 'The Strange Death of Tory England', *Dissent* (fall 1995), pp. 447–52.

³⁵ A. Adonis, 'The Transformation of the Conservative Party in the 1980s', in A. Adonis and T. Hames (eds.), *A Conservative Revolution? The Thatcher–Reagan Decade in Perspective* (Manchester, 1994), pp. 145–67.

³⁶ H. J. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969), pp. 17–37; P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (2nd edn., London, 1971), pp. 23–54; J. A. Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: The Peerage in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1984); J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1985).

³⁷ G. Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680–1730* (London, 1982); J. Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1988); idem, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997); P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1700* (Oxford, 1989); P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989); idem, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1991).

eighteenth-century English society has been depicted: for Donald Coleman, there was one great divide, between those he called the ‘gentlemen’ and those he termed the ‘players’; for E. P. Thompson, there was another, between the ‘patricians’ and the ‘plebs’, who were the direct descendants of the landlords and peasants of the late medieval period.³⁸

The close correspondence between these three mutually-exclusive historical interpretations of English society, and the three mutually-exclusive contemporary social perceptions is as noteworthy as it is unrecognised and unremarked upon—and it is a correspondence, incidentally, which could be as easily demonstrated for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as for the eighteenth. What conclusions might be drawn from this? One is that it is cause neither for surprise nor dismay that historians’ social descriptions should so closely mimic contemporary social descriptions. (Although it is, perhaps, cause for mild regret that they seem so unaware that this is what they have been—and still are—doing.) Another is that when Peter Laslett tells us that eighteenth-century society is traditional, rural, and hierarchical, when Paul Langford asserts that it is modernising, urban, and middle class, and when E. P. Thompson says there is a great divide between the landowning *banditti* and the rest of the population, we should recognise that we are being given historical descriptions of Hanoverian society which are every bit as partial and discrepant as those of the contemporaries which they unselfconsciously echo and perpetuate.³⁹

But how did contemporaries manage then, and how have historians managed since, to maintain these mutually-exclusive descriptions of what was, after all, the same single, unitary, and functioning society? Part of the answer is that although in the abstract these were different models, based on different criteria, in practice, it was—and it is—easy to move from one to another and

³⁸ D. C. Coleman, ‘Gentlemen and Players’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., xxvi (1973), 92–116; E. P. Thompson, ‘Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture’, *Journal of Social History*, vii (1974), 382–405; idem, ‘Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?’, *Social History*, iii (1978), 133–65; P. King, ‘Edward Thompson’s Contribution to Eighteenth-Century Studies: The Patrician-Plebeian Model Re-Examined’, *Social History*, xxi (1996), 215–28.

³⁹ For a recent, and (inevitably) inconclusive attempt to discuss the relative merits of these three historical interpretations, see D. Hay and N. Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society: Shuttles and Swords* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 17–36, 188–208. For an even more inconclusive debate on the popularity and appropriateness of the hierarchical and three stage models as the more ‘accurate’ guide to Hanoverian England, see the following exchange between J. M. Innes and J. C. D. Clark. Innes: ‘I would happily wager that a thousand contemporary references will be found characterising eighteenth-century England as a “commercial society” to every one characterising it as landed, aristocratic, noble hierarchical or the like.’ Clark: ‘I happily accept: but, alas, Innes has not yet named the stake.’ It cannot be said that such exchanges seriously advance the cause of historical understanding. J. M. Innes, ‘Jonathan Clark, Social History, and England’s “Ancien Regime”’, *Past & Present*, no. 115 (1987), 181; J. C. D. Clark, ‘On Hitting the Buffers: The Historiography of England’s Ancien Regime: A Response’, *Past & Present*, no. 117 (1987), 206, n. 34.

back again.⁴⁰ Especially if they were at the top of it, those with a traditional, individualistic view of society were also inclined to draw a single line between gentlemen like themselves, and every one else beneath them: from the hierarchical to the dichotomous model was an easy and frequent step. Those who belonged to the 'middling sorts' might instead rank themselves hierarchically, according to the prestige of their professions or public office. Alternatively, they might embrace the dichotomous model, in which case they could either conflate themselves with their betters as prosperous property owners, or join with their inferiors in attacking patrician privilege. And those of inferior status and income might see society as divided between themselves and everyone else who was better off, or as divided into workers, employees, and aristocracy, or as linked by an all encompassing chain of connection which threaded its way from the bottom to the top. Once again, it was possible to move from the dichotomous to the triadic to the hierarchical model with relative ease and plausibility.

Although these three visions and versions of English society in their purest forms have been conceptually discrete and taxonomically irreconcilable, it has often been possible in practice for contemporaries (and even, sometimes, historians⁴¹) to adjust and rearrange the categories, so as to meld and merge these models, moving backwards and forwards from one to the other. But this was (and is) also because the *language* in which these different visions of society were (and are) articulated drew often (and increasingly) on the same vocabulary. We tend to think that in England, as in France, Germany, or Spain, different models of social structures were expressed in different social vocabularies: that the hierarchical was articulated in terms of rank, order and station; that the triadic was expressed in terms of 'sorts' or classes; and that the dichotomous had its own terms, ranging from 'patricians' and 'plebs' to 'us' and 'them'. To some extent, this was (and is) no doubt so.⁴² But there were other languages of social description which were more broadly applied, to such an extent that similar words employed in different contexts were actually referring to different models of society. For much of the time, rank and order and degree were used to refer not only to hierarchy, but also to the three-stage or the two-stage model of English social structure. And from the third quarter

⁴⁰ For some suggestive hints, see D. Wahrman, review of Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman*, in *Social History*, xvii (1992), 500–1; E. H. Gould, 'American Independence and Britain's Counter Revolution', *Past & Present*, no. 154 (1997), 134, n. 92.

⁴¹ E.g. J. C. D. Clark, who employs both the hierarchical and (sometimes) the dichotomous model in describing eighteenth-century society: Clark, *English Society*, pp. 43, 90; King, 'Edward Thompson's Contribution to Eighteenth-Century Studies', *Social History*, xxi (1996), 221.

⁴² P. Burke, 'The Language of Orders in Early Modern Europe' in M. L. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification* (London, 1992), pp. 1–12.

of the eighteenth century onwards, all three models of society were increasingly articulated in another common language: and that, of course, was the language of class.

Self-evidently, it is impossible to provide satisfactory proof of the interchangeability of the language of social description, and of the increasing pervasiveness of the language of class across these different models of social structure, within the confines of a single lecture. But here are three examples which at least bear this proposition out. The first is Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* in which he offers alternative definitions of class. One is class as 'a rank or order of persons': as a synonym for individualistic hierarchy. The other is class as 'a set of beings or things, arranged under some common denomination', which implies collective categories, possibly three, possibly two.⁴³ The second example is that when, in his speech in the 'Don Pacifico' debate, Lord Palmerston talked of 'every class in society', he was not referring to the three-stage model of upper, middle, and lower: he was using class as a synonym for individual rank or station. To the extent that he saw mid-Victorian Britain as a 'viable class society', it was in hierarchical terms rather than triadic or polarised collectivities.⁴⁴ And the third is a recent speech of Tony Blair's, where he remarked that in 1900, England possessed 'a class structure in which the upper, middle and lower *ranks* were sharply delineated', remarks which remind us, that even today, when using the triadic model, the language of ranks and the language of class remain easily and essentially interchangeable.⁴⁵

Thus far, then, I have sought to make three arguments: first that three models of social structures and social identities have been remarkably pervasive and enduring in England over the last three centuries; second, that although these models were conceptually very different, in practice contemporaries have easily moved from one to another; and third, that they have often, but not always, been articulated in the same words, sometimes the vocabulary of ranks and orders, sometimes and increasingly the language of class. Thus regarded, class may best be understood as the modern shorthand term for all three of the vernacular versions and visions of English society. In our post-Marxist world, class may have fallen, may even be dead, as the grand

⁴³ Corfield, 'Class by Name and Number', pp. 102, 114.

⁴⁴ Perkin, *Modern English Society*, pp. 408–9. As George Watson (*English Ideology*, p. 180) notes, 'much of the profusion of class terms and class discussion in the mid and late Victorian era becomes more intelligible and informative if it is seen as based on a general assumption [i.e. model] of rank and hierarchy'. By agreeable coincidence, Halsey, *Change in British Society*, pp. 200–1, prints a passport signed by Lord Palmerston in 1851, and rightly noted that it describes 'social hierarchy from Her Majesty down through the Viscount to Mr Holroyd, and thence to sons and daughters, and finally a man and maid servant'. This was how Palmerston, and most mid-Victorians, saw their nation.

⁴⁵ A. Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (London, 1996), pp. 45, 65, 237, 298.

narrative of ‘the history of all hitherto existing human society’. But in our post-modern world, class as social descriptions and social identities, class as hierarchy or as upper-middle-lower or as ‘us’ and ‘them’, class as ways of seeing society and seeing ourselves, is still very much alive. Why else, indeed, has John Major’s notion of trying to make England into a ‘classless society’—an ambition predicated on the continued, if ill-defined, existence of class—resonated so powerfully during the 1990s?⁴⁶

The fact that Marxism is thought to be dead does not, should not, indeed cannot, mean that class is dead—at least in England. But to clear these matters out of the way is merely to bring several other problems more sharply into focus. First: if it is the case that these three visions of English society have remained largely unchanged across the centuries, and that they have often been articulated in the same language, then where does that leave the argument, so beloved of historians a generation ago, and of sociologists to this day, that the crucial historical development, associated with the industrial revolution, was the fundamental and irreversible shift from individual status to collective class? Second: if the *same* vocabulary has often been used to describe *different* models of English society, then what are the implications for the currently fashionable claim that it is language which is the essential variable in constituting social structures and social identities? Third: how, in the light of the answers to these questions, might we better understand and begin to explain the ebb and flow of these three visions of English society across the centuries? How, in short, might we set about historicising—or, rather, re-historicising—class?

* * *

I begin by addressing the first question. It used to be believed by many historians, and it is still proclaimed by many sociologists, that the crucial (and crucially-connected) social and linguistic developments in modern England took place at the time of the industrial revolution: the change from an individualist hierarchy of ranks to a collective society of classes, in which the language of status based on prestige was appropriately superseded by the language of class based on income.⁴⁷ But from a post-modern perspective,

⁴⁶ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. vi (New York, 1976), p. 482; R. J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution, 1780–1850* (London, 1979), p. 10; Junor, *The Major Enigma*, pp. 202, 253–4; S. Hasler, ‘Britannia rules—but she’s enslaved to class’, *The Sunday Times*, 22 December 1991.

⁴⁷ Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society*, pp. 176–217; A. Briggs, ‘The Language of “Class” in Nineteenth-Century England’, in M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout (eds.), *Essays in Social History* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 154–77; Halsey, *Change in British Society*, pp. 57–9; S. Edgell, *Class* (London, 1993), p. 1; A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA since 1930* (London, 1980), p. 16, and p. 359: ‘class, I have argued, had its origins in the Industrial Revolution’.

there are two powerful objections to this venerable interpretation. The first is that the old, traditional hierarchies of status were *not* vanquished, and new middle and working classes, with a strong sense of collective identity and consciousness, were *not* coming into being. Among historians, this account of the years from the 1780s to the 1830s has been out of fashion for the best part of two decades, and there seems no prospect of its being revived in its old Marxist or *Marxisant* guise.⁴⁸ The second objection is that before, during and after the industrial revolution, all three models of English society were available, and remained available, and all three of them were expressed both in the language of ranks and in the language of class.⁴⁹ Taken together, these insights mortally undermine the old master narrative in which, thanks to the sudden economic change, the old English social hierarchy based on prestige was replaced by new social groups based on income, and at just the time that it was supposed the language of class was coming into being to describe them.

But if (to turn to my second question) different models of English society were and are regularly articulated in the same vocabulary (be it ranks or, increasingly, classes), where does this leave the by now very familiar argument that social identities are primarily the constructs of language? During the last two decades, the claim that language is the key to the creation of social identity, that our social vocabularies and our social fabric ‘mutually prop each other up’, has passed from fertile and suggestive hypothesis to self-evident and revealed truth without receiving much by way of convincing empirical verification.⁵⁰ But if the same social vocabularies have been used, and are still being used, to refer to very different models of society, then

⁴⁸ In which context it is worth recalling these remarks of E. P. Thompson, ‘The Making of Ruling Class’, *Dissent* (summer 1993), 380: ‘“Class” was perhaps overworked in the 1960s and 1970s, and it had become merely boring. It is a concept long past its sell-by date’. For a work which wholly dismisses and disregards the concept of class, see F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1990). See also P. Addison, ‘Dismantling the Class War’, *London Review of Books*, 25 July 1991, pp. 12–13; G. Crossick, ‘Consensus, Order and the Social History of Modern Britain’, *Historical Journal*, xxv (1992), 945–51; T. Koditschek, ‘A Tale of Two Thompsons’, *Radical History Review*, no. 56 (1993), 68–84. In all these cases, class was being used (or not being used) to denote social identities which were collective, rather than hierarchical.

⁴⁹ For one study of early twentieth-century England which recognises the continued existence of all three models of society, see B. Waites, *A Class Society at War: England, 1914–1918* (Leamington Spa, 1987). For a recent impressionistic account which, like Orwell, uses all three models in a familiar, confused and un-self-aware way, see J. Cooper, *Class: A View from Middle England* (London, 1993 edn.), esp. pp. 11–14, 17, 149, 242, 318.

⁵⁰ Q. R. D. Skinner, ‘Language and Social Change’ in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 132; G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983); R. Q. Gray, ‘The Deconstructing of the English Working Class’, *Social History*, xi (1986), 363–72; D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, ‘Social History and its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language’, *Social History*, xvii (1992), 165–88; J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, ‘The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language—A Reply’, *Social History*, xviii (1993), 1–16.

clearly the connection between the social vocabularies and the social identities is much more complex and contingent than has generally been realised. The difficulty for those devoted to the 'linguistic turn' is that they have often been so narrowly preoccupied with language that they have failed to notice that the same vocabulary may be describing very different models of social structure and thus implying very different social identities. This means that it is almost impossible to infer from the language itself which model of society is being referred to, and which social identities are being described. Here is a simple illustration. When people in England talk of 'the class system', and of their place within it, do they mean class as hierarchy, or as upper-middle-lower, or as 'us' and 'them'? The words themselves do not and cannot tell us.⁵¹

I now turn to my more positive and more extended comments about the ways in which the appeal of these visions of English society has waxed and waned across the centuries. If we accept that the language of class is often being used to describe the traditional, layered social order, this may enable us to recognise one of the most important but under-studied subjects in modern English history, and that is hierarchy. The belief that society was hierarchically constructed was not only central to the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries: it has also been more important in our own century than has generally been recognised. The functioning hierarchy of aristocratic rulers and great estates may have declined, but hierarchical attitudes and perceptions have survived with remarkable tenacity during the last hundred years, with articulate defenders from W. H. Mallock and Lord Hugh Cecil to Maurice Cowling and Michael Portillo, and articulate critics, among whom R. H. Tawney was probably the most powerful.⁵² At the same time, the image of England as a hierarchical society was successfully reasserted towards the close of the nineteenth century: in the proliferation of royal and civic ceremonial, which reaffirmed by display

⁵¹ For the dangers inherent in such 'very literal reading of language', see D. Wahrman, 'The New Political History: A Review Essay', *Social History*, xxi (1996), 345. See also S. O. Rose, 'Respectable Men, Disorderly Others: The Language of Gender and the Lancashire Weavers' Strike of 1878 in Britain', *Gender and History*, v (1993), 393; M. W. Steinberg, 'Culturally Speaking: Finding a Commons Between Post-Structuralism and the Thompsonian Perspective', *Social History*, xxi (1996), 194–201.

⁵² W. H. Mallock, *Aristocracy and Evolution* (London, 1898), p. 49; idem, *Memoirs of Life and Literature* (London, 1920), pp. 1–16, 197; Lord Hugh Cecil, *Liberty and Authority* (London, 1910), p. 56; idem, *Natural Instinct the Basis for Social Institutions* (London, 1926), pp. 14–15; M. Cowling, 'The Present Position', in idem (ed.), *Conservative Essays* (London, 1978), pp. 10–11; M. Portillo, speech delivered on 14 January 1994, quoting Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 1, Scene iii, 'O, when degree is shak'd'. This passage, stressing order, hierarchy, and subordination, is discussed by Tillyard, *Elizabethan World Picture*, pp. 7–8. It is printed in K. Baker (ed.), *The Faber Book of Conservatism* (London, 1993), pp. 19–20, and is approvingly quoted by Lord Lawson in his foreword to Bauer, *Class on the Brain*. For R. H. Tawney's critique of the continued existence of hierarchy and hierarchical attitudes in inter-war Britain, see *Equality* (London, 1931), pp. 25–8, 31, 38–9, 50, 87–8, 97, 123.

the view that society was carefully layered; in the expansion and consolidation of the British Empire, where complex rules and rituals of precedence reached their zenith, especially in India; and in the re-structuring and extension of the honours system, with many new levels and divisions tied to different social strata. And as God was succeeded by Darwin, a new authority was found to legitimate this ranked, unequal social hierarchy. Divine providence might no longer sustain the view that society was best envisaged and understood as a great chain of being. But the new theory of secular evolution could—and did.⁵³

One does not have to go to India to discover *Homo Hierarchicus*: he has been alive and well and living in England.⁵⁴ Perhaps the fact that England has, during the last three hundred years, endured only one military defeat, while avoiding invasion, occupation, civil war, and revolution helps explain why many people still insist on seeing it—some with approval, others with dismay—as the most hierarchical society in the western world.⁵⁵ Yet the fact is that hierarchy as a way of seeing things and as a way of doing things has been all but ignored as a serious subject in the modern period: by historians of the right because they incline to take its continued existence for granted; by historians of the left, and by sociologists, because they take its disappearance, sometime during the nineteenth century, no less for granted.⁵⁶ But if one looks

⁵³ D. Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy: Grandeur and Decline in Modern Britain* (London, 1994), pp. 78–80, 88–90; B. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in E. J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 165–210; Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, pp. 6, 234–5; Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality*, p. 30; W. D. Rubinstein, 'The Evolution of the British Honours System since the Mid Nineteenth-Century', in idem, *Elites and the Wealthy in Modern British History: Essays in Social and Economic History* (New York, 1987), pp. 222–61; S. R. Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860–1940* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 165–73.

⁵⁴ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago, 1991); R. Burghart, 'Hierarchical Models of the Hindu Social System', *Man*, xiii (1978), 519–36; A. Appadurai, 'Is Homo Hierarchicus?', *American Anthropologist*, xiii (1986), 754–61.

⁵⁵ Consider these remarks of Pierre Laroque, describing the social order at the time of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II: 'Great Britain brings us into the presence of an old country very attached to her traditions. The British social hierarchy is to a large extent one of the products of these traditions. It is an accepted hierarchy which is widely recognised and has never been seriously debated. The majority of the population even show a real attachment to this social hierarchy. As a result there has never been deep class antagonism in Great Britain.' Quoted in A. Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 257.

⁵⁶ For two suggestive and stimulating uses of hierarchy as a way of understanding the past, see G. Clark, *Symbols of Excellence: Precious metals as Expressions of Status* (Cambridge, 1986), esp. pp. 9–11, 27–30, 65–7, 104–5; J. Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge, 1982), esp. pp. vii, 99–111, 133–53. For one rare attempt to treat hierarchy as a continuous and important theme in the history of our nation, see R. Strong, *The Story of Britain* (London, 1996), pp. 79–83, 205, 210, 259, 333, 335, 431–41, 489, 502–3, 527, 538, 568. It is surely not coincidence that Sir Roy Strong trained as a student of Tudor and Stuart portraiture and pageantry—portraits and pageants explicitly designed to celebrate, proclaim, and reinforce a hierarchical view of the world. For a rare example of a sociologist trying to deal with popular perceptions of our society as hierarchical, see D. Lockwood, 'Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society', *The Sociological Review*, NS xiv (1966), 249–67.

at the history of social perceptions and social identities in modern England from the standpoint of Tudor times, there is clearly a question which cries out to be addressed and answered: whatever happened to the Elizabethan world picture? E. M. W. Tillyard himself provided his own speculative answer, which deserves to be followed up: 'we shall err grievously . . . if we imagine that the Elizabethan habit of mind [i.e. seeing the world hierarchically] is done with once and for all. If we are sincere with ourselves, we must know that we have that habit in our own bosoms somewhere'.⁵⁷

This survival of hierarchical perceptions needs to be given at least as much attention by historians as the more commonplace analyses of modern English society built around contemporaries' three-fold or two-fold models of collective identities. But this is not just a matter of recovering and giving appropriate attention to the most pervasive perception of English society, important although that undoubtedly is. For it bears repeating that throughout the last three hundred years, all three ways of seeing society have been available, and during much of the time, people have easily moved back and forth from one of them to another. But these models have not always co-existed peacefully. Despite their easy vernacular and linguistic accommodation, their deeper and more fundamentally irreconcilable incompatibilities were pregnant with confrontational political implications. At certain times, and in certain circumstances, these models became explicitly politicised and adversarially inflected, as different people sought to defend society as they saw it, or to change it for an alternative model: those who wanted to proclaim hierarchy against its critics and detractors; those who wanted to assert the importance of the middle class vis-à-vis those above and below; and those who occupied one or other side of what was seen as a great social (and political) divide.

The evidence for the ebb and flow in the resonance of these different social perceptions is clear. For most of the eighteenth century, with a slight interruption during the 1760s, the hierarchical view seems to have been the commonest, though there is ample evidence of its relatively peaceful co-existence with the other two models.⁵⁸ But from the 1780s to the 1840s, many people came to see English society in terms of three warring collectivities, or believed a great gulf had opened up between the rich and the poor, or thought that hierarchy urgently needed defending. During the mid-Victorian period, the hierarchical view was successfully reasserted, and the triadic and dichotomous pictures of society were generally much less popular. Then again, from the 1880s to the 1910s, there were those who hoped (or feared) that society was becoming divided between the people and the peers, or between employers and workers. During

⁵⁷ Tillyard, *Elizabethan World Picture*, pp. 101–2.

⁵⁸ J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 139–272; N. Rogers, 'The Middling Sort in Eighteenth-Century Politics', in Barry and Brooks, *The Middling Sort of People*, pp. 159–80.

the inter-war years, it seemed as though the conflict between capital and labour reached its peak in 1926, but the alternative vision, of an ordered, integrated, hierarchy was strongly articulated, most famously by Stanley Baldwin.⁵⁹ From 1945 to 1980, many people believed there was one fundamental division in society, between the middle and working classes, or capital and labour, which was institutionalised in the two great political parties, or between the Establishment and the non-Establishment, or U and non-U speakers. But there were also those who lamented that society was less hierarchical than it had been, while others despaired that it was more hierarchical than it ought to be.⁶⁰

It bears repeating that all these views of English society were excessively simplistic. But there can be no doubt that at particular times, these competing social visions and politicised social identities have been very appealing. How was it, then, that different ways of envisioning English society, which for the most part peacefully co-existed and merged and melded into one another in the popular imagination, were sometimes proclaimed and asserted in this strident, competitive and confrontational manner? If we look at the issue this way round, then this should enable us to establish more plausible and more flexible connections between social structures and social perceptions than those rather rigid and one way links posited by the Marxists in one direction, or the followers of the ‘linguistic turn’ in another. For it is not that changes in social structures lead directly to changes in social perceptions, as in traditional accounts focusing on the making of class consciousness. Nor is it that social perceptions directly constitute and create social structures, as those who stress the constitutive power of ‘the language of class’ believe. Rather, it is that we need to understand how, when and why different social models (often expressed in similar language) have appealed to different people at different times by offering them the most resonant and appealing accounts of the world they think they inhabit—or of the world they think they want to inhabit.

Part of the answer to this question will clearly be to do with discontent: not in the sense that discontent is the direct expression of, or results in fundamental changes in, the social structure, which has not been the case in England during the last three hundred years; but rather in the sense that it is discontent which causes people to see the same social structure in an alternative light, as dissatisfaction means they discover new friends and make new enemies, as

⁵⁹ D. Cannadine, ‘Politics, Propaganda and Art: The Case of Two “Worcestershire Lads”’, *Midland History*, iv (1977), 97–123; P. Williamson, ‘The Doctrinal Politics of Stanley Baldwin’, in M. Bentley (ed.), *Public and Private Doctrines: Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 184–98.

⁶⁰ N. Mitford, ‘The English Aristocracy’, *Encounter*, Sept. 1955, pp. 5–11; A. S. C. Ross, ‘U and Non-U: An Essay in Sociological Linguistics’, *Encounter*, Nov. 1955, pp. 11–20; H. Thomas (ed.), *The Establishment* (London, 1959); P. Worsthorne, ‘Class and Conflict in British Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs*, xxxvii (1959), 419–31.

riots and protests project and render credible a dramatically different vision of their society from that of elaborately staged and carefully ranked official processions, and as the three or two stage models of society thus come to make more sense to them than the traditional hierarchical picture. But if this is right, then it also means we ought often to be looking at the way in which social description sometimes becomes explicitly politicised, and at the part played by politicians in the creation and articulation of social identities, and in the process whereby one version and vision of society becomes, for a time, more appealing than the alternatives.⁶¹ For many politicians, from Wilkes to Cobbett, Cobden to Gladstone, Lloyd George to Stanley Baldwin, Margaret Thatcher to John Major, one of the most important things they wanted and needed to accomplish was to persuade people to see their society (and their place within it) differently, which in practice has meant moving them from one model of social description to another.

Consider, in this light, these examples. When Wilkes invoked ‘the common people’ against the Hanoverian establishment, when Cobbett inveighed on behalf of the majority against ‘old corruption’, when the Whigs feared in the 1820s that the social fabric was being rent in twain, when the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers described themselves as a ‘middle-class set of agitators’ railing against aristocratic tyranny,⁶² when Disraeli feared there were ‘two nations’ between whom no bond of sympathy or understanding existed, when the great Lord Salisbury lamented the ‘disintegration’ of hierarchy, when Lloyd George attacked ‘the peers’ in the name of ‘the people’, when Stanley Baldwin commended traditional rural and factory communities, when Harold Nicolson worried in 1945 that ‘class feeling’ was very strong, when Arthur Scargill claimed the miners were the advanced guard of the proletarian revolution,⁶³ and when John Major evoked ‘middle England’, many people did come (and have come) to believe that these arresting but over-simplified descriptions were genuine, truthful accounts of how English society actually was, or was becoming. In fact, of course, they were no such thing: they were not objective descriptions of contemporary society, and nor were they evidence that old social formations were dying or new social formations coming into existence. They were merely evidence that politicians were, in Lady Thatcher’s words, ‘trying to change the way we look at things’, and this is an aspect of political

⁶¹ K. Wilson, ‘Whiggery Assailed and Triumphant: Popular Radicalism in Hanoverian England’, *Journal of British Studies*, xxxiv (1995), 126.

⁶² E. A. Wasson, ‘The Great Whigs and Parliamentary Reform, 1809–1830’, *Journal of British Studies*, xxiv (1985), 457; E. Royle and J. Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers, 1760–1848* (Brighton, 1982), pp. 175–6; N. McCord, *The Anti Corn Law League, 1838–1846* (London, 1958), p. 127; G. M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (London, 1913), p. 141.

⁶³ M. Crick, *Scargill and the Miners* (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 28–31; P. F. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900–1990* (London, 1996), pp. 378–9.

behaviour and social perceptions which needs much more attention than it has thus far generally received. The more democratic Britain has become, the more party politics has been concerned with the creation, articulation and transformation of social identities, rather than merely being the direct reflection and unmediated expression of pre-existing social identities.⁶⁴

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This remark of Margaret Thatcher's leads conveniently to my conclusion, since I have been concerned throughout this lecture with the ways in which 'we look at things', and with the processes by which the ways in which 'we look at things' are changed. I have argued that these questions were not convincingly addressed by the old-style historians of class, any more than by the new-style historians of language. The first approach was in error in claiming the economically-determined creation of self-conscious classes leads directly to, and can be demonstrated by the existence of, the new language of class. The second approach is no less in error in supposing that language directly constitutes social perceptions and thus social identities. I have argued, on the contrary, that throughout modern English history, there have always been three different models of the social structure and social identities on offer, of which hierarchy has been both the most important and the most neglected. In theory these models and these identities are mutually exclusive, but in practice they are usually melded and merged one into the other, in part because they shared a common vocabulary, of which the language of class eventually became the most common of all. But at other times, these three models and identities become politicised, mutually-exclusive and confrontationally inflected, and it is the historian's task to find out when, how, and why this happened, and to construct from these answers the more detailed master narrative of the ebb and flow of multiple social identities that has been briefly sketched in here.

It has recently been argued that landscape is what culture does to nature: investing what would otherwise be regarded as the wilderness with shape and significance, meaning and identity.⁶⁵ Of course, this cultural activity is partly a matter of doing and making the landscape itself: of planting the trees, diverting the rivers, cutting the grass. But it is also the process whereby these trees, rivers, and grass become invested with the meanings and identities they bear, and that process is as much a matter of perception and politics, language and

⁶⁴ M. Thatcher, *The Revival of Britain* (London, 1989), p. 98; J. Lawrence, 'Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880–1914', *English Historical Review*, cviii (1993), 629–52; D. Jarvis, 'British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s', *English Historical Review*, cxi (1996), 59–84.

⁶⁵ S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995), pp. 10–18.

rhetoric, sentiment and association, as it is a result of the conscious and conspicuous acts of landscaping themselves. By the same token, it can also be argued that in England, class is what culture does to inequality and social structure: investing what are otherwise anonymous individuals and unfathomable collectivities with shape and significance, meanings and identities, by moulding our perceptions of the social worlds in which we live and the social structures to which we belong. As with landscape, this is partly a matter of the social structure itself, which does change and evolve in terms of numbers, location, occupation, and so on—albeit relatively slowly. But like landscape again, it is also a matter of language, human agency and politics. Just as the meaning of landscape can be disputed, so perceptions of the social structure can be contested and changed: though only in terms of three basic models, which often employ a common vocabulary, sometimes of ranks, more usually of class.

The way people see themselves in society, the way people see the society to which they belong, and the way these things interconnect, contradict, diverge, and change over time: these are exceptionally complex issues, which have only recently surfaced on the agenda of historical inquiry.⁶⁶ But when Jonathan Dimbleby tells us the Prince of Wales ‘yearns for lost hierarchies’, when Alan Bennett writes of ‘the conventional three-tier account of social divisions’, and when John Kenneth Galbraith opines that the great divide in the world today is not between labour and capital, but between rich and poor, we ought at least to be able to recognise these familiar formulations for what they are: not original interpretations, but the latest variants of social descriptions going back three hundred years and more; and not complete, objective accounts of how society is, but partial, subjective visions of society as they want or choose to see it.⁶⁷ As these examples serve to remind us, we need to think more carefully and more self-consciously about how we think about ourselves as social individuals, social beings, and social groups, about how our forebears thought about themselves, and about how our successors might think about themselves. Like sex, class does not take place entirely inside our own heads: but for more reasons than one, that is probably the best place to begin thinking about it and looking for it.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ In which regard, it is worth noting Lord Runciman’s observation (*London Review of Books*, 10 March 1994, p. 5) that ‘in twentieth as in fifteenth-century England, there are systematically observable inequalities of economic, ideological and political power, to which the contemporary rhetoric relates in all sorts of still understudied ways’. (My italics).

⁶⁷ J. Dimbleby, *The Prince of Wales: A Biography* (London, 1994), p. 523; A. Bennett, *Writing Home* (London, 1994), p. 33; J. K. Galbraith, *The Good Society: The Humane Agenda* (London, 1996), pp. 6–9. For a recent account of contemporary English society which uses all three models, see R. Seitz, *Over Here* (London, 1998), pp. 93–134.

⁶⁸ This is the argument advanced in Furbank, *Unholy Pleasure*; idem, ‘Sartre’s Absent Whippet’, *London Review of Books*, 24 February 1994, pp. 26–7.

I end, as I began, with just such a head: another individual observer describing the social order of England more than half a century ago. But this is not George Orwell, it is someone else; and it is not the nation as whole, but one particular town. Nevertheless, the similarities in social perceptions are striking, and instructive. For once again, the same three models of society co-exist: comfortably yet contradictorily, compatibly but confusingly. One way of seeing it was as a civic procession, hierarchically structured from the Mayor, via carefully-ranked local figures and organisations, to the humblest labourer. A second vision divides it into upper, middle, and lower collective groups, with the observer emphatically in the centre of things. Yet a third picture is of the town riven by one great gulf, between those who had a regular income, and a lifestyle to match, and those who did not. The correspondence between these descriptions and perceptions of English society and those of George Orwell, or Mr Gladstone, or John Major, or countless millions of ordinary people across the last three centuries, is virtually exact. But to which town do these descriptions relate? And to whom are we indebted for them? The place was Grantham, and the author of these remarks was Margaret Thatcher.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, 1993), p. 10; idem, *The Path to Power* (London, 1995), pp. 5, 19, 23–4, 47, 546. For a more extended analysis of Thatcher's social visions, see Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 171–80.