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Social Classes in Britain

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Set of documents

Compare and contrast the following documents:

Document A

The “Rise and Fall of Class” in Britain is both an allusive and ironic phrase, totally correct yet also at least half mistaken. It is allusive (and correct) because, during the last twenty years or so, the
5 once-fashionable and widely accepted view that class structure and class analysis provide the key to understanding modern British history and modern British life has been disregarded by many historians and abandoned by almost all politicians. Hence the “Rise and Fall” of the title. Yet it is also ironic (or mistaken), because it remains a generally
10 held belief, not just in Britain, but around the world, that class, like the weather and the monarchy, is a peculiarly and particularly British occupation. It certainly has been in recent years at 10 Downing Street. For was it not John Major who declared, shortly before becoming Prime Minister in November 1990, and in a phrase that has continued
15 to resonate ever since, that his aim was to bring about what he called the “classless society”? One does not have to be a master logician to conclude that he thought – and surely, in this regard, thought rightly – late twentieth-century Britain to be a class-bound and class-obsessed nation. In which case, of course, the irony is that there has
20 been no Fall of Class at all. It is still with us, still around us, still inside us, still part of each of us.

There is, then, a tension – indeed, a contradiction – between the allusive and the ironic messages conveyed in the phrase the “rise and fall of class in Britain”. Has class “fallen” or hasn’t it? If so, why do
25 some people maintain that it hasn’t? And if it hasn’t, why do others

insist that it has? Two quotations may serve to sharpen this tension and heighten this contradiction: one is from a nineteenth-century male political theorist; the other from a twentieth-century female political practitioner. Here is Karl Marx: “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” – a confident, grandiloquent, all-encompassing, much-quoted (and often misquoted) phrase, which has resounded down the decades since it was originally coined, and which has inspired much political activity, some good and some bad, and much historical scholarship, of which essentially the same may be said. And here, more recently, but no less self-assuredly, is Margaret Thatcher: “Class”, she insisted, “is a communist concept. It groups people as bundles, and sets them against one another.” These could hardly be more divergent views, and they could scarcely be more trenchantly expressed. For Marx, class was the essence of history and of human behaviour; but for Thatcher, class has been the perversion of both.

As these contrasted quotations imply, the last two decades have witnessed a fundamental re-thinking of the economic, social and political history of modern Britain, with the result that class analysis and class conflict, which had until recently seemed so central to it, have ceased to carry the conviction they once did. Instead, an alternative interpretation has come to prevail which, although not always explicitly Thatcherite, certainly shares her assumption that class should be downplayed, disregarded and denied, and that grouping people in confrontational collectivities is a subversive rhetorical and political device rather than an expression or description of a more complex, integrated and individualist social reality.

David Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 1998, p. 1-2

Document B

“Today at the frontier of the new Millennium I set out for you how, as a nation, we renew British strength and confidence for the 21st century; and how, as a Party reborn, we make it a century of progressive politics after one dominated by Conservatives.

5 A New Britain where the extraordinary talent of the British people is liberated from the forces of conservatism that so long have held them back, to create a model 21st-century nation, based not on privilege, class or background, but on the equal worth of all. And New Labour, confident at having modernised itself, now the new
10 progressive force in British politics which can modernise the nation, sweep away those forces of conservatism to set the people free. [...]

15 People are born with talent and everywhere it is in chains. Look at Britain. Great strengths. Great history. English, the language of the new technology. The national creative genius of the British people. But wasted. The country run for far too long on the talents of the few, when the genius of the many lies uncared for, and ignored.

20 Fail to develop the talents of any one person, we fail Britain. Talent is 21st-century wealth. Every person liberated to fulfil their potential adds to our wealth. Every person denied opportunity takes our wealth away. In the 18th century land was our resource. In the 19th and 20th century it was plant and capital. Today it is people.

25 The cause we have fought for, these 100 years, is no longer simply our cause of social justice. It is the nation's only hope of salvation. For how do you develop the talent of all, unless in a society that treats us all equally, where the closed doors of snobbery and prejudice, ignorance and poverty, fear and injustice no longer bar our way to fulfilment. Not equal incomes. Not uniform lifestyles or taste or culture. But true equality: equal worth, an equal chance of fulfilment, equal access to knowledge and opportunity. Equal rights.
30 Equal responsibilities.

35 The class war is over. But the struggle for true equality has only just begun. To the child who goes to school hungry for food, but thirsting for knowledge, I know the talent you were born with, and the frustration you feel that it's trapped inside. We will set your potential free. To the women free to work, but because they are also mothers, carers, helpers barely know how to get through the day, we will give you the support to set your potential free. To the 45-year-old who came to my surgery a few months ago, scared he'll never work again,

40 I say: you didn't become useless at 45. You deserve the chance to start
afresh and we will set your potential free. And to those who have
wealth, but who say that none of it means anything if my children
can't play in the park, and my mother daren't go out at night. We share
your belief in a strong community. We will set your potential free.

45 And it is us, the new radicals, the Labour Party modernised, that
must undertake this historic mission. To liberate Britain from the old
class divisions, old structures, old prejudices, old ways of working
and of doing things, that will not do in this world of change. To be the
progressive force that defeats the forces of conservatism.

50 For the 21st century will not be about the battle between
capitalism and socialism but between the forces of progress and the
forces of conservatism. They are what hold our nation back. Not just
in the Conservative Party but within us, within our nation. The forces
that do not understand that creating a new Britain of true equality is
55 no more a betrayal of Britain's history than New Labour is of
Labour's values. The old prejudices, where foreign means bad. Where
multiculturalism is not something to celebrate, but a left-wing
conspiracy to destroy their way of life. Where women shouldn't work
and those who do are responsible for the breakdown of the family.
60 The old elites, establishments that have run our professions and our
country too long. Who have kept women and black and Asian talent
out of our top jobs and senior parts of Government and the Services.
Who keep our bright inner-city kids from our best universities. And
who still think the House of Lords should be run by hereditary peers
in the interests of the Tory Party. The old order, those forces of
65 conservatism, for all their language about promoting the individual,
and freedom and liberty, they held people back. They kept people
down. They stunted people's potential. Year after year. Decade after
decade."

Tony Blair, speech at the Labour Party Annual Conference,
1999

Caveat: remarks on methodology

In the context of this special issue, my goal is to provide students with examples of what could ideally be expected of a well-prepared candidate to the CAPES; the analysis that follows is not meant to be read as a synthesis on the issue of class in Britain, which is well beyond the scope of the present work. Rather, I will rely on my experience as a teacher of MEEF students in order to address the difficulties that they face and the questions that they raise. The bibliographical section includes a number of references suggested as further reading. For the sake of clarity, I have included headings and subheadings in the body of the commentary, but candidates should remember that they are not allowed to do so and should rely on explicit transitions only.

When it was used in class, this set of documents proved challenging in specific ways. First, the two texts and the image that compose it are problematic because of their mediatic nature. Document B is the transcription of a speech; therefore, it is a performative text meant to convince an audience, not necessarily convey objective facts. Its style reproduces some of the markers of orality, imbuing it with more immediacy. Political speeches in general, regardless of their origins, should be approached with a critical eye. Thus, candidates should not take Blair's speech at face value; nor should they assume that his premiership resulted in all the accomplishments that he claims to undertake.

As for Document C, it is a one-page newspaper comic, a form which by definition combines words and images; candidates should pay equal attention to each of these aspects. The specific vocabulary of comics, such as "panels" (*cases*) "speech balloons" or "speech bubbles" (*bulles*), "captions" (*récitatifs*), etc. may cause issues. Moreover, Simmonds's page is imbued with a specific ontological status (fiction) and tone (comedy) which must be explicitly underlined and accounted for in the commentary. Specifically, this piece (and indeed much of Simmonds' graphic *oeuvre*) can be seen as a fictionalised snapshot of Britain's social landscape in the 1980s, with its foibles and contradictions.

Because it is almost contemporary and deals with a highly political topic, this set of documents will also test the candidates' ability to adopt a detached point of view and abstain from passing judgement (on Blair, on the validity of Marxist theses, etc.). Students should remember that they should never give their own personal opinions unless they are explicitly instructed to.

A final and more general pitfall that they must avoid is neglecting the British context and transposing their French cultural knowledge onto

British society. In particular, while social divisions are obviously part of their daily experience, they should bear in mind the fact that France and Britain in this regard have very different national traditions; while the French Revolution and the Declaration of Human Rights enshrined the belief that “all men are born and remain equal”, inequality is at the core of the United Kingdom’s social organisation. The fundamental differences between a republic and a parliamentary monarchy in which aristocratic and royal privileges are still a significant part of political life should not be underestimated.

Finally, as with any set of documents whose focus is on civilisation, candidates should refrain from devoting entire parts or subparts to purely stylistic aspects without showing what purpose they serve. In the present case, it is indeed necessary to analyse Blair’s rhetorical strategies; but this must be done in connection with his political aims - the redefinition of the Labour Party’s political line as New Labour, for example. Identifying emphatic elements aimed at convincing, such as repetitions, nominal phrases, etc. is important; focusing on the discursive elements associated with individuality (e.g. through an analysis of lexical fields) is even better, and most relevant to the broader issues at stake here (that is to say the opposition between individual and class in Blair’s speech).

Introduction

In his wartime essay entitled “England, Your England”, George Orwell delineated what for him constituted the essence of Britishness. In this text, he famously declared England to be “the most class-ridden country under the sun”, “a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly” (Orwell 19). These sentences resonated with the widespread idea that the British, and the English in particular (although the two terms are not synonymous at all, they are used almost interchangeably in Orwell’s essay), were obsessed with class and with how class distinctions shaped the social fabric of the country. Half a century later, despite the tremendous social and geopolitical changes undergone by the United Kingdom, the importance of class as a distinctively British preoccupation was still under scrutiny, as evidenced by the three documents under study.

Document A is an extract from historian David Cannadine’s book, *Class in Britain*, which was published at the very end of the 20th century (1998). In this passage, Cannadine examines the paradox of what he terms “the rise and fall of class” (doc. A line 1) in the contemporary period, that is to say the permanence of two contradictory views of the role played by

social classes in Britain. As the author makes clear in lines 20-21, although class seems to have lost some of its relevance as a prism through which to accurately view society, phenomena of class distinction are “still with us, still around us, still inside us, still part of each of us.”

Document B is the transcription of a speech given by Prime Minister Tony Blair to the members of his party during the Labour Party’s Annual Conference. It was pronounced two years after Labour’s landslide victory in the 1997 General Elections. In this speech, Blair promotes his view that Labour should strive to provide equal opportunity to all and fulfil each individual’s potential. These values are consistent with Blair’s attempt to modernise the Labour Party (rebranded as “New Labour”), which is why he emphasises the need to focus on the future. As we will see, Blair’s doctrine of equal opportunity does not presuppose the end of class divisions themselves, but it does suggest that “class” as an ideology no longer constitutes an adequate political vision.

Finally, document C is a comic strip by cartoonist Posy Simmonds. It was initially published in the *Guardian*, a left-leaning British newspaper, in 1986. The title, “Union Jakes” (obviously a pun on the Union flag or “Union Jack”), is connected with the characters’ conversation; a group of British and American people discuss the possible connection between “class divisions” (doc. C panel 6) and “toilet humor” (doc. C panel 7), which one character claims are the two national obsessions of the British. Over the course of the conversation, it turns out that the British protagonists all use different words for “toilets”, depending on their social origin and upbringing: “Loo’s more a middle-class euphemism... and lavatory’s more upper-class...” (doc. C panel 14).

This discussion is set against the more general backdrop of *le passé dans le présent*. Indeed, the various documents question the permanence of class distinctions, which are alternatively relegated to the past or presented as a current issue: in their own ways, Cannadine, Blair and Simmonds all debunk a broadly Marxist view of history in which the revolution of the proletariat and the abolition of private property would serve as stepping stones towards the ultimate social organisation of Marxism, a truly classless society. Instead, they provide different views of the evolution of British society, marked by comical “decline” for Simmonds (panel 1), messianic “progressive force” (10 and 48) for Blair, cultural and political “re-thinking” (49) for Cannadine.

As we shall see, this set of documents illustrates and interrogates the supposed lack of relevance of the notion of class at the end of the 20th century, caused by deep-seated changes in society, while at the same time

making it clear that inequalities and social status remain central to our understanding of contemporary Britain. All three documents reflect contradictory views of class as both a thing of the past that has lost most of its relevance, and an important aspect of social reality in the 1980s and 1990s.

First, we shall examine the different meanings of “class”, a word laden with complex and sometimes contradictory connotations. In a second part, we shall focus on the specific contradictions attached to the ideas of class and classlessness at the end of the 20th century, and on the socio-economic context that fostered them. Finally, we will explore the critical frameworks that have come to define class as merely one of the aspects involved in the delineation of British identity.

I. Class, an elusive notion?

All three documents use the word “class”, but the meaning of this term can be difficult to pinpoint. Thus, we begin by bringing to light the different nuances it can convey.

Class “structure”

Fundamentally, to talk about “class” is to refer to the hierarchical organisation of society into different layers – the “class structure” that Cannadine talks about (doc. A line 4). In this sense the term supposes that the population can be divided into different groups according to their occupations or roles in the production structure, which in turn influence their wealth, status and behaviours. From this point of view, the class structure is not necessarily based on opposition or conflict, as evidenced in Posy Simmonds’s comic strip. Here, each character views the others in terms of their respective social status, from the “posh[est]” to the most “non-U” (doc. C panel 11) – that is to say non-upper-class. These differences are emphasised by Simmonds’s use of visual stereotypes: paunchy, tipsy Edmund Heep is a modern-day interpretation of John Bull (notice the two glasses he carries in panel 5), while Stanhope Wright has a much more dignified and even slightly condescending attitude (see his facial expression in panel 15). However, regardless of their places on the social ladder, they all end up laughing at the same jokes in the very last panel. This suggests a view of society that is integrated and goes smoothly from top to bottom.

Class “war”

Conversely, “class” can also involve “grouping people into confrontational collectivities” (doc. A line 49), as Cannadine suggests. In

this sense, “class” is linked to the idea of a “class war” (or class struggle), as developed by Marx. For Marx, the driving force behind society is precisely the opposition between two classes (the proletariat and the bourgeoisie) whose interests are fundamentally different, and who are perpetually opposed. Under certain conditions, workers can develop class consciousness, meaning that they become aware of their common condition, and of the need to unite in order to better it. The political consequence of this thesis, of course, is the need to abolish class through common ownership of the means of production – which is why Thatcher claims that class “is a communist concept [that] groups people as bundles, and sets them against one another” (doc. A line 36). This Marxist view of society, which initially developed from the mid-19th century onwards, has “inspired much political activity” (doc. A line 32), notably through the actions of Labour Party, whose 1918 Constitution called for common ownership of industry (clause IV), and the Communist Party, which was at its strongest in the interwar period. However, as the 20th century advanced, this political ideology became less and less successful electorally. This is part of the “fall of class” that Cannadine examines in his book, and to which we will return below.

Class “distinctions”

Before we turn to this aspect, we need to acknowledge the fact that “class” can encompass more than an individual’s economic and professional status: class is also the “lifestyles or taste or culture” mentioned by Blair (doc. B lines 27-28). When we say that someone “has class” in this sense, we talk of their attitude, demeanour, clothes, accent, etc. It is this understanding of class that features predominantly in Simmonds’s strip: the different words that her characters use to refer to the same reality (i.e., in this instance, toilets) place them in different categories that are predicated not so much on economic differences as on issues of behaviour and upbringing. The link between education and level of language, for example, is made clear when, in panel 5, Stanhope Wright declares “at my prep school we used to call it the rears”: preparatory schools are fee-paying organisations for children aged 8 to 13 whose aim is to enter a selective grammar school. Prep schools mostly cater for the children of upper-class parents with high revenues, and provide their pupils with excellent job prospects, but also with the social knowledge and behaviour that is typical of their class.

In this regard, it is no coincidence that Simmonds refers specifically to “class *distinctions*” (doc. C panel 3, my emphasis). Indeed, her strip

seems to illustrate the theories developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his book *The Distinction*, where he explains that class is not predicated merely on economic capital (*pace* Marx) but also on social capital (one's connections) and symbolic capital (one's tastes and cultural knowledge). This is a much broader view of class, and in this sense too, a paradoxical "rise and fall of class" appears in Simmonds's strip, as her characters are simultaneously separated by their different sociolects, and brought together by their common fondness for profanity.

In other words, the simultaneous assertion and denial of class, which Cannadine underlines in the realm of history and politics, is also at the heart of Simmonds' humorous presentation of everyday life in the 1980s. Indeed, despite Mr Weber's initial assertion that "class distinctions here [...] simply aren't as rigid as you've been implying" (doc. C panel 3), the American character insists, with the corresponding gesture, that the UK is "still kinda upta-here in class divisions" (doc. C panel 6). In the second part of this commentary, we shall focus on the specific socio-political context of the 1980s and 1990s so as to explain the context in which the "rise and fall of class" takes place.

II. Class at the end of the 20th century

"Has class 'fallen' or hasn't it?"

Cannadine's text underlines the deeply contradictory role of class in political discourse in late 20th-century Britain. This contradiction is in fact double; first, the relentless reassertion that class is, or should be, a thing of the past (by John Major in 1990, see doc. A lines 12-15, and by Tony Blair in 1997, see doc. B) paradoxically shows its continued relevance. Secondly, class no longer seems to serve as an ideological marker of Leftist thought: while the Labour party at its inception was tied to the struggles of the working-class via its direct link to the trade unions, by 1999 its leader could comfortably declare the end of the class struggle ("the class war is over", doc. B line 31). This was not because history had led to a successful proletarian revolution, but because class no longer stood as the fault line of social history. This idea resonates also with Cannadine's comment that in the last years of the 20th century, many politicians assumed "that class should be downplayed, disregarded and denied" (doc. A 48) – in this regard, despite their many oppositions on the political spectrum, Blair and Thatcher share a similar outlook. Attitudes to class seem to be the product of an era.

Changes in the social makeup of the country

Indeed, the United Kingdom in the 1980s and 1990s faced global changes that led to a weakening of the traditional reading of class. These changes are half-jokingly acknowledged in Simmonds's strip through the mention of "Britain's decline" (i.e. its loss of status as a first-class power, doc. C panel 1). An important factor on the world scene was the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of the United States as sole victor after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. When Blair makes it clear that "the 21st century will not be about the battle between capitalism and socialism" (doc. B lines 49-50), he acknowledges the victory of capitalism as the *de facto* dominant framework in a post-USSR world.

However, beyond the international context, other factors in the United Kingdom specifically led to the "fall of class". First, the decline of manufacture and heavy industry in the UK (blue-collar jobs) and the rise of the service industry (white- and pink-collar jobs) changed the way in which workers relate to the means of production. It is to this change that Tony Blair alludes when he claims that "talent" has replaced "plant and capital" (doc. B line 21) as the main resource of the 21st century.

Concomitantly, work patterns changed drastically, as workers were encouraged to become increasingly mobile and flexible, thus loosening the social fabric. Trade unionism, undermined during Margaret Thatcher's premiership, lost traction, and the link between social class and political affiliation weakened. Social mobility developed, leading to the apparition of a newly-affluent middle class, the Young Urban - or Upwardly-mobile - Professionals ("yuppies") mentioned in Simmonds's comic (doc. C panel 13). The term has a negative connotation in the strip, at least for Stanhope, who "hates" the way they speak: that is because Stanhope is a privately-educated member of a traditional *élite*, who objects to the rise of these new ambitious professionals. And of course, here we find again the idea of a "rise and fall" of class: even as traditional social strata are disturbed by the rise of a new group, this group is judged according to its language and accent ("the way they speak"), a traditional marker of class in Britain.

Broadly speaking, therefore, the end of the 20th century was marked by the development of individualism as one of the core values of society. Inequalities did not disappear, but they were somehow attributed to individual variations rather than class dynamics. For Blair, "true equality" lies in "equal worth", an expression repeated twice (doc. B lines 8 and 28), meaning that he focuses on each individual's potential within society, rather than thinking in terms of the different layers of society. Blair

emphasises the importance of a commonly-shared potential or “worth”, which, it seems, is naturally present in all individuals in equal measure. This rhetoric even leads him to paraphrase Rousseau, who, in the opening pages of *The Social Contract*, contrasts nature’s inherent goodness with society’s negative influence: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”. In Blair’s speech, this is applied to individual worth: “People are born with talent and everywhere it is in chains” (doc. B line 12). Talent, in other words, is a natural gift, not the result of socialisation and class behaviour. Blair refuses a deterministic view of society and posits that potential is not predicated on social origin.

Ideological changes: rebuilding Labour

More precisely, Blair casts “privilege, class or background” (doc. B line 8) as criteria that belong to the past (“the old class divisions” doc. B line 46), rather than the future. This is consistent with Blair’s constant use of an opposition between old and new: he suggests that change is inevitable, and that politics should adapt to the progress of history. Hence the need to outline the specificities of New Labour, a party “reborn” (doc. B line 3) under his guidance. Indeed, we should not forget that this is a public speech aimed at attacking political enemies and fostering unity among Labour voters under the banner of New Labour.

When Blair attacks “the forces of conservatism” (repeated four times, notably line 51), he means first of all the Conservative party, whom he casts as the enemy of individual development: “for all their language about promoting the individual, they held people back” (doc. B line 66). But he is also, implicitly, jabbing at those among the party who still believed in Labour’s traditional values – indeed, he is at pains to clarify that New Labour is not “a betrayal” of those values (doc. B line 54).

Nevertheless, Blair’s vision was an ideological sea change for the party, predicated partly on the economic changes discussed above, and partly on electoral strategy; in order to win the 1997 General Elections, Labour refocused on the middle classes, and Blair accordingly emphasised individual merit (“talent”) over collective labour. His rhetoric replaces the logic of class (where society’s hierarchy is relatively stable) with the logic of social mobility, where each individual can rise according to his or her own potential in a free market economy. New Labour is thus held up as a “third way”, a political option that occupies a middle ground between the socialist belief in a strong state and public sector, and the possible excesses of liberal capitalism.

III. Class and identity

As we have seen, the economic and social upheavals of the late 20th century led politicians on both sides to reconsider the way they approach class. In this part, we turn to the broader role played by class in the intellectual history of the times.

Failure of class as a grand narrative

Having identified the “contradictions of class” in the previous section, we now turn to a new hypothesis, namely the possibility that class, although still an important aspect of society, has ceased to function as the one central theme of social life and is merely one of several factors guiding it. This is what Cannadine seems to suggest when he claims that society has lost the ability to believe in the “confident, grandiloquent, all-encompassing” (doc. A lines 29-30) discourse of class understood as key to the “history of all hitherto exiting society” (doc. A lines 28-29). In other words, to use a concept developed by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, class in the Marxist sense is a “grand narrative” (or “master narrative”), an ideological framework that once seemed to encompass the complexity of the social world, but now has “ceased to carry the conviction [it] once did” (doc. A line 45).

From a Marxist point of view, then, progress in the form of a classless proletarian revolution has failed to materialise. Conversely, political thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama have argued that the “fall of class” is in fact a sign that Western liberal democracies have entered the “end of history”, in the sense that they have reached a stage in which no alternative political ideology challenges their social organisation. Fukuyama even claims that in these liberal, egalitarian systems, class inequalities are, or will eventually become, insignificant. In other words, from this point of view, historical progress has reached its ultimate goal, and the “classless society” it has produced is closer to the one advocated by John Major (doc. A line 15) than to the one Karl Marx envisioned.

Rehabilitation of class within intersectional theory

Not all late 20th-century thinkers, however, were willing to do away with the notion of class. Thus, in 1989, the year of the publication of Fukuyama’s “End of History” essay¹, black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in order to account for the many factors which determine social privilege (or lack thereof). Within

¹ For more information about this seminal essay, see Nicoals Labarre’s paper in this volume.

this framework, which still draws from Marxism, class is but one aspect of social inequality, others being gender, race, age, sexuality, ability, etc. By looking beyond a person's relationship to the means of production, intersectionality complexified our understanding of social identities.

Interestingly, the factors of gender, race and age all make an apparition in Tony Blair's speech, as he mentions the specific plight of "women and black and Asian [people]" (doc. B line 60), as well as "45-year-old[s]" (doc. B line 37) facing long-term unemployment. In Blair's rhetoric, too, class no longer accounts for the entirety of an individual's social identity, nor does it determine their status as dominant or oppressed. This is consistent with the liberal (in the political sense) measures taken by Blair in favour of LGBT rights, gender equality and the fight against discrimination. With the individualistic shift of the late 20th century, Labour focused on identity politics, not class distinctions.

Permanence of class as a dimension of national identity

In sum, the permanence of class is linked to its role in an imagined "Britishness". "Like the weather and the monarchy", as Cannadine suggests (doc. A line 10), class underpins the common narrative of what it means to be British. In this regard, Britain differs from France and the United States, whose national narratives are predicated on a revolutionary phase during which old hierarchies were toppled. The execution of King Charles I did not mark the permanent end of the old regime; instead, the interregnum from 1649 to 1660 was followed by the restoration of a parliamentary monarchy that persists to this day.

And while the monarchy might be the most immediately visible sign of the permanence of social inequality and privilege in the United Kingdom, it is not the only one; as Tony Blair remarks, "the House of Lords [and] hereditary peers" (doc. B line 63) is another. Indeed, as of Blair's speech to the Labour Party annual Conference, the Upper House of Parliament still comprised several hundred members whose right to sit in the House stemmed from their inherited peerage. Only a few months later, the House of Lords Act 1999 cut the number of sitting hereditary peers to ninety-two, thus reducing, but not ending, class privilege in the legislature.

In this regard, the title of the comic strip, "Union Jakes", is obviously meant to emphasise the link between British identity (through the evocation of the union flag) and the two topics at stake here – class and toilet humour. Moreover, when she chooses to contrast British behaviour with American reactions, Posy Simmonds suggests the opposition between

the deeply inequalitarian tradition of the UK and the American myth of classlessness: the United States' dominant myth is that of the self-made man, whose success is based on hard work and not on innate privilege.

Conclusion

Over the course of our analysis, we have shown that the three documents under study all address the peculiar status of class as an analytical tool in the late 20th century, and in particular under the premierships of Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair. We began by exploring the different meanings of the word "class" as it is used in the set of documents; then, we moved to a consideration of the economic specificity of the period and its consequences on social discourse. Finally, we suggested that this ideological shift was also tied to broader intellectual sea changes in the postmodern era, in which social status incorporates not only class, but also identity in its broader sense.

This leaves us with a final question, which concerns our more recent past; in the first two decades of the 21st century, did the contradictions of class remain the same as under Thatcher and Blair? Or is it safe to assume that the changing economic situation, marked by the 2008 crisis and by the perspective of social stagnation or even downward mobility, may yet again change the way in which class in Britain is perceived?

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