Social Mobility and the Middle and Upper Classes

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The aristocracy and gentry-- those whose prestige and wealth came from the land-- also had an enormously varying degree of experiences and incomes. A magnate with 10,000 acres might be a wealthy man; but a family such as the Londonderrys of county Durham and Ulster earned more in mining royalties than many massive landowners might ever have enjoyed from strictly rural incomes, rents, and so on. Moreover, while historians have focused on the imbalance in wealth and privilege noticed in the urban world, it would be hard to find a mill-owner and a factory hand as much separated by income and outlook as were some Anglo-Irish landlords and their poor tenants. Social stratification was indeed a feature of urban life, but it was rural as well as urban, within classes as much as between them.

The struggle for self-improvement that observers noted in the attitudes of working men and women was matched, in the case of the middle classes, by a desire to hang on to what they had. The closer to the working classes we make this observation, the more acute

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the struggle seems. There was little in our period that so clearly defined manners, customs and social attitudes as the desire of a petit-bourgeois (lower middle class) shop-owner or clerk retain what he had. The petit-bourgeoisie were thus jealous of their superiors and horror-struck at the thought of sinking back into the mass of their inferiors (some of whom had a higher take-home pay). The social and political conservatism of this bloc of people-- a bloc which existed in every small town as well as every city-- helped to ensure character of Victorian society and political culture. Perhaps the embodiment of the world view of the petit-bourgeoisie is George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892). First published in *Punch* in 1891-2, this short novel tells of the story of a lower-middle-class clerk from Holloway, London. A cruel satire written in the first person, the book immortalised Charles Pooter and his wayward son, Lupin. The Pooters rent a house rather too close to the railway line (the landlord lets it go cheap because of the noise) and fill their lives with the snobberies the imagine to be typical of a slightly higher class. Delivery men and servants they can ill-afford are made to use the rear entrance of what is, in fact, a rather modest town house. The idea of maintaining an abode slightly too expensive for Pooter's salary typifies the anxieties of this much-parodied class. Despite the joke, Pooter's class did become large and influential in Victorian society. They tended to be physically settled ratepayers, which gave them access to the vote before many working men who might otherwise match their incomes; they also tended towards clubs, societies, civic events and local politics. While, in national terms, these people may have lacked the clout of the big capitalists and industrialists, the lower-middle classes were undoubtedly as important as they were numerous.

At the top of the pile, in 1880, were the aristocracy with their seeming monopoly on privilege and political power in, if not in earned wealth. The challenge they faced from the big bourgeoisie-- capltalists and industrialists-- was far from undifferentiated; and, in any case, the continued power of land, in both Houses of parliament (though especially in the Lords) made it clear that any transfer of power was an issue for discussion. Whilst we might expect the great industrialists to have seized political power without too much trouble, this is not actually the case. Research on the political parties at the time of Second Reform Act (1867) demonstrates that there was a increasing middle-class

representation in politics; however, this amounting to a sharing, not a usurping, of power. The quest for political power was also complicated by the degree to which wealthy financiers, commercial entrepreneurs and industrialists bought into, rather than rejecting, the aristocracy. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the 1830s, had praised Britain's open aristocracy as a major cause of social cohesion and a major brake on movements towards social revolution. As a consequence, instead of seeking to destroy landed privilege, the middle classes, while not averse to weakening the hold upon power of the large magnates, instead sought out lands, estates and titles for themselves and their offspring. Salmon-fishing, hunting and other country pursuits gradually became as much as pastime of new money as of the old landed class.

The openness of England's aristocracy is not just a matter of myth. That there was no revolution in Britain in our period, and the fact of the monarchy's increasingly popularity later in the period (as opposed to its collapse or destruction) must come from a degree of approval for the system of governance as it existed, True, events such as the reform crisis of 1830-2 raised the spectre of usurpation by the forces of populism; but how real this was is open to debate. The likelihood of a successful mass uprising at this point is certainly

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questionable. The key issue in politics was the gradualist transition of a portion of power from aristocratic to middle-class hands. This did not amount to a wholesale abandonment of power nor a forcible seizure. By a clever yet simple process of occupying available spaces on the benches of power and an incremental expansion of the electorate and the development of something akin to urban democracy in the towns, Britain's elites maintained a high proportion of their actual power and almost all of their status. Between 1688, when Gregory King made his important study of the population of England, and 1803 when Patrick Colquhoun engaged in a similar process, England and Wales's aristocracy grew from almost 17,000 families to more than 27,000. The middle ranks grew in proportion from 435,000 families to just over 630,000. The lower order, too, increased at a similar rate from 1.3 m to just over 2 m. While these surveys do not correspond to modern social science they are, in effect, as much as we have to make such calculations, and, when read it general terms, do no disservice to our attempts to explicate general principles. What we can see is that, while the poor expanded because population was growing, and the middle class developed because opportunity knocked at the door of the potential entrepreneur, this latter group, once they had made their money, could find a way on to the high table by buying an estate, title, etc. It was this fluidity between the middle- and upper classes that underpinned Britain's social stability. The radical, Richard Cobden, made a despairing reference in 1857 to the fact that 'the higher classes never stood so high in relative social and political ranks, as compared with the other classes, as at present. The middle class has been content with the very crumbs from their table.' The truth was slightly different: the ruling elite naturally dominated the House of Lords, but they also outnumbered all other groups in the Commons; and, while this was the case, the middle classes looked to a place at the aristocratic table-- not merely the crumbs that fell from it. Middle-class politicians came into their own in the early twentieth century; but even then, the old families and those of landed wealth, or their sons, continued to be a significant portion of the office-holders at Westminster.

At every level, then, class is a complicated issue. There is no doubt that by the 1880s, a classic 'them and us' working -class mentality was in existence. Developed by social stratification, labour conflicts, struggles with employers, segregated living environs and by a more generalised, if diffuse, sense that working men and women were not enjoying their share of the industrial and

imperial honeycomb, a high degree of social polarisation did emerge. However, that polarisation had its equivalents in country as well as town; within the middle class as well as between the classes; between new wealth and landed privilege.

The process of acclimatising the arriving middle class was not entirely simple; behind the statistical picture was layer upon layer of tradition: manners, customs, blood-lines, historical status. Land, alone, was not enough to guarantee acceptance into what was a social and culture as well as political elite. Many middle-class aspirants were ridiculed by those privileged by birth. However, second-generation landowners, the sons and daughters of the self-made mill-owner or commercial entrepreneur, could, through education and the right marriage, make a permanent mark. The super-elite aristocracy-- those who had spent many generations working their way into the centres of power, bolstering huge estates with government service and work in tile armed forces, etc-- were relatively few. Aspirants and middle-rankers alike came and went; bankruptcy, scandal and the demographic dead-end of nurturing a child-less marriage could all signal the end of a family and, hence, an opportunity for someone rich in empire cash or mining royalties.

The aristocracy also showed a remarkable acumen for going with the economic flow. If land remained their vital spark, the source of the privilege as well as their wealth, hundreds of landowners were also able to share in the new privilege of industrialisation. The Lowther family of Whitehaven owed its initial power to the kingly patronage of Charles I, who granted them control of the harbour trust. With this came colonial wealth in coal and tobacco. In the nineteenth century, when Whitehaven mattered less as a port, the Lowthers, Curwens and others drew good living from mineral royalties in coal and iron. A striking example of how a large landowner could massively increase his wealth through mineral royalties can be seen in the shape of Lord Londonderry, whose Durham estates were as coal-rich as any in the world in the 1840s. He built his own port, Seaham Harbour, and ran his coal concerns like a feudal baron. The Duke of Devonshire and, to a lesser extent, the Duke of Buccleuch, made fortunes simply because they owned the land upon which the Victorian boom-town of Barrow in Furness came to be situated. Devonshire's man, James Ramsden, ran the Furness Railway Company (the town's *de facto* council until incorporation in 1867) and had shares in ship-building, iron and steel manufacturing, the steam corn-mill, and a variety of other interests. The seventh duke had completely reinvigorated the rather creaky English and Irish aristocratic empire that his uncle, the sixth duke, had bequeathed to him: benevolence towards his rural tenants in Derbyshire and Lancashire, however, was juxtaposed with the poor living conditions of his industrial workers in Barrow.

If Devonshire provides a good example of the landed entrepreneur, his right-hand man, lowly-born Liverpool engineer, James Ramsden, whose rise to middle-class prosperity came on the back of his own entrepreneurship and Devonshire's patronage, provides an interesting model of the new social arrangements in the Victorian towns. The middle class did the day-to-day work: they became the mayors, they were the aldermen, they ran the councils, they owned and ran the hospitals, they were the clerics, doctors and shop-keepers. But the middle-class, as the listing in the previous sentence suggests, was a huge group. It ranged from the lowest clerk, who earned little more than the skilled man, to the factory-owning magnate. It included professional men of a huge variety, whether those employed in the service of God or the government, to those who designed ships, stamped customs' documents and others who designed cathedrals. An increasingly complex economy created an increasingly complex array of middle-class professions; an age of bureaucracy and burgeoning government created new jobs for the man with a good education, from town planning and sanitary

engineering to factory inspection, and, later, health and safety. It might seem ironic, perhaps, but the emergence of a mass blue-collar trade union movement also led to a rash of clerking jobs, based in central and regional offices.