

Is modern Britain still
a class society?



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Historically, British society has been defined by a clearly demarcated system of social classes. In the medieval period, this was characterised by a feudal system of landowners and serfs (Bloch, 2014); in the early modern period the courtly aristocratic model defined the British class system, and this morphed in the last two centuries to form the traditional tripartite model of the working, middle and upper classes. However, in recent years such a system has been called into question. It has been argued that Britain is a class-less society, that socio-economic and democratising political forces have combined to rid the society of its vertical, pyramid structure. Proponents of this levelling process have argued that Britain, in the globalised twentieth century, is characterised by other, wider contextual forces than those of the national class system (Portes and Walton, 2013). However, this essay will take issue with this contention, and argue that announcements of the death of the class system in Britain are not merely premature or exaggerated, they are fundamentally wrong. Whilst net measures of wealth, education and so on point to improvements and progression en masse, the kinds of intra-societal divisions which mark out the class system have, if anything, increased in recent years, rendering Britain a society not merely defined but dominated by its class system.

One of the defining features of a class system is that it has a lowest strata or group. This has been defined variously as the lower classes, the working classes, the serfs or the 'under class.' Irrespective of terminology, this presence of a lowest social group is one which is a defining feature of class systems; it is seen, notably, in other cultural contexts such as the ethno-religious Hindu caste system, which identifies a clearly lowest class in the

form of the so-called ‘untouchables’ (Rahaman, 2015). Thus, one argument in favour of Britain no longer exhibiting a class system might be the contention that no such underclass exists any longer. Such an argument is false, however, as social marginalisation, social exclusion, greater inequality and other social realities of contemporary British life make evident. What has often been mistakenly identified as the erosion of the class system is in fact a net movement upwards with respect to standards in British society as a whole. Therefore, it is true that British people, across the income spectrum, are better educated, live longer, and enjoy better living standards than they did in previous centuries (Graham, 2012). Yet, this has been matched by a general increase in standards for British people as a whole. The class system is a measure of demarcations within the collective social body, not a measure of general standards, and thus, it may be argued that the class system in Britain has become more rather than less entrenched in recent decades, as a net increase in standards has taken place alongside an increase in inequality.

The effects of the free market economic policies which defined the Thatcher governments of the 1980s and which were repackaged and continued in the form of New Labour have been significant in their impact on the British social structure and class system. They can be understood in the context of global free market economics, identified elsewhere with economics figures such as Milton Friedman, political figures such as Ronald Reagan, and concepts such as Monetarism, Neoliberalism, and so-called Reaganomics (Hill, 2015). Such policies have resulted in considerable wealth creation. In Britain under Thatcher, they were predicated on the so-called ‘trickle down’ effect,

whereby it was believed that wealth creation among the upper echelons of society would have a knock-on effect whereby those members of the lower classes benefited from it. The very terminology – the idea that wealth would trickle down from higher up – betrays the degree to which these policies were predicated on the idea of a still-existent class system (Vinen, 2013). Indeed, Thatcher's aspirational emphasis in her rhetoric and policy-making was indicative of this fact: she stressed the desire to create a British society (a term which she famously would not have used) in which members of the lower classes could aspire to join the ranks of the middle and upper classes, and that upward-mobility was something of which a society and its people could be proud (Hill, 2015). The very possibility of upward-mobility implies a class system, but what these policies effected was, rather than a collective move upwards for the lower classes and therefore an abolishment of the class hierarchy, was the exact opposite. Instead of reducing class differences, Thatcherism increased them. It enabled some to become enormously wealthy and others to remain poor. Even if the latter group were to be better off, the class system is a relative one and as such, a greater relative difference between one social strata and another compounds class differences, even if the overall result is that everyone is better off in absolute terms.

This misconception is at the heart of arguments which, this essay contends, mistake absolute changes in the nature of British social life for changes to the relative position of its social classes. The net result of Neoliberal economics, both globally and domestically in Britain, has been an increase in the wealth gap, a shoring up of the class system, and a greater distinction

between the haves and the have-nots (Mount, 2012). This is seen most evidently in the persistence of the social underclass, which has been rendered relatively worse off by the wealth creation at the top of society, wealth which has not trickled down (Jones, 2012). Indeed, the creation by the New Labour government of a Social Exclusion Unit in 1998 (Stanley et al., 2011), tasked with the job of intervening among the lower classes to prevent people from being excluded from the benefits that society has to offer, is evidence of the fact that wealth has not trickled down. The severe economic disparity between the wealth of London – Britain's financial capital – and the rest of the country, particularly the North-East, is further evidence of class division on a geographical level. Cribb et al. (2013) have shown that income inequality has knock-on effects in terms of social exclusion, such that even in the event that people want to move up the class system, the system itself, pace Thatcherism, works to prevent this from being feasible. The decision by Thatcher to privatise a number of British industries, to actively take on industrial and manual workers such as in the case of the Miners' Strikes, and to concentrate much of British wealth and financial power in the hands of a number of leading banks and corporations in the City of London, all contributed to this greater division in British society (Jones, 2012). The result is that the poor are, relatively speaking, poorer, and the rich are, absolutely speaking, much richer and, relatively speaking, fantastically richer. A large percentage of Britain's wealth is possessed by an increasingly small percentage of its population. The knock-on effects in terms of class division, social exclusion, and the perpetuation of the so-called underclass, are palpable.

It might be argued that, so far, this essay has demonstrated how income inequality and wealth gaps have increased in Britain in recent decades, and that this is not the same as saying that the class system has been entrenched and increased in the same way. Indeed, wealth is not a straightforward synonym for class in Britain. This essay has so far avoided defining the term 'class' for the very reason that it is nebulous and not something which can be defined in straightforwardly quantitative terms. It is, to some extent, a question of self-identification. Thus, a family with a low net income might identify itself as middle class, whereas a family or couple or individual with a greater net income might, conversely, consider themselves to be lower class. However, a useful working definition of class is inclusion/exclusion (Kraus et al., 2012). The higher the social class, the more social opportunities, resources and capital one is privileged to. The higher the social class, the greater access there is to the things the country has to offer, the greater the individuals are included. By contrast, lower social classes are defined by their being excluded from certain resources and opportunities that the society has to offer. Therefore, the lower classes might be excluded from private education, top universities, higher standards of medical care, and leisure opportunities and facilities (Scott, 2014). Whilst these are correlated with wealth, they are not simply coterminous with it. For example, a family might have the money to put their children through university, but if they or the children feel socially excluded from higher education (because they feel they are too lower class to belong there), then they will not attend and could therefore be socially excluded in any case. It is the contention of this essay that social exclusion remains a defining feature of British society,

and as such the class system continues to operate to distinguish between those who are part of the 'in' group, and those that are not.

As noted above, this is seen in areas such as education and healthcare. One might cite the life expectancy variation in privileged parts of London compared with less privileged areas as evidence of the degree to which the poor are socially excluded from the benefits of British medical resources, technology and science (Scott-Samuel et al., 2014). Furthermore, one might cite the preponderance of public school educated children at top higher education institutions, and in the upper echelons of British social life more generally, as evidence of the degree to which people from lower-incomes or lower socio-economic groups are not afforded the same opportunities and the same inclusive rights as other individuals from higher class backgrounds. The prevalence of gang culture in inner-city environments is evidence of the marginalisation of youth from deprived socio-economic backgrounds (Jones, 2012). The London Riots of the summer of 2011 brought this class division into the spotlight, and constitute quite damning evidence of the idea that Britain is no longer a class-defined society. Similarly, the UK Uncut movement, whilst situated in the global context of the financial crisis, and its opposition to the 1%, is further evidence of a groundswell of social discontent within the UK at the degree to which the country's population is socio-economically divided (Mount, 2012). This is not to mention some of the wider social problems which affect Britain and which impinge on the idea of class: among them questions of language (Standard English being the preserve of an elite class and contrasted with 'lesser' forms of speech such as regional or dialect English), race and nationality (with immigration and the

resistance to inward-migration into the UK being topical political issues which impinge on ideas of class and social status).

In sum, and to conclude, Britain remains a society sharply divided on socio-economic and class lines. That these divisions have increased in both number and degree is clear evidence of the perpetuity of the class system. Although there has been net increases in living standards throughout the history of modern Britain (with the possible exception of periods of war (Price, 2013)), the relative changes which have taken place, especially in the last four decades, have been ones which have exacerbated difference rather than reduced it. The class system has been stretched rather than diminished, such that the socially excluded bottom is now excluded to a greater degree than before, whilst the wealth and privilege of the elite has increased exponentially. Whilst wealth difference is not a fool proof indication of class difference, analysing inclusion and exclusion (with the upper classes enjoying the former and the lower classes suffering the latter) makes clear the degree to which Britain is not an equal society of equal opportunities. The class system operates on the principle that there are those who have, and there are those who have-not. British society operates on the same lines, and as such continues, not merely to exhibit, but to be defined by its class system.

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