

# A Sense of Classlessness

## Stuart Hall

CLEARLY, there has been a major shift in the patterns of social life in this country. How deep they go, and whether they alter our older notions of "class" is difficult to tell. (See Note 1: The Post-War Boom.) The drawing of distinctions is made more difficult by the fact that such changes are taking place at a remarkably uneven pace—the old crowding in upon the new and blurring the points of transition. The focal centres of this process are the large cities—and the new urban concentrations we are making: though the spread of these patterns of life into smaller cities and throughout the country may be swifter than we suppose. (Given the predominance of the London metropolis over other centres in our cultural life, its concentration of the channels of communication, the pace of change should not surprise us.) But even in large urban centres, the unevenness of development makes analysis difficult. In the area of south London where I live, old and new physical environments coexist within a single borough. Here are the old two-storey brick dwellings of a working-class suburb, row after row in a dark street butting straight into the warehouse, lumber yard or factory gate: there are the new eight-storey flats of an L.C.C. housing estate, enclosed in a grass-and-concrete jig-saw, offering the beginnings of a "contemporary" urban facade. Along the Brixton Road, the barrow boys are hawking goods outside a "utility" style British version of the supermarket. Some of the local children go to school at a Dickensian brick building constructed—and hardly re-touched—since the 1880's: but not far away is the glass-and-steel compound of the local Comprehensive, not yet completed.

It is not only a matter of new physical surroundings. The post-war prosperity and the high levels of employment have made possible new spending habits amongst working people. A local housewife in a new town whom we talked to said, colloquially, "Yes, we've got a small car—if that's what you can call it." Fifteen years ago a car would have been considered a luxury: today, she is looking forward to the day when she can exchange the second-hand model for a small new family car. This attitude towards a whole range of consumer goods has altered, of course, even within the interiors of older-style working-class districts: but the change is to be seen most sharply where exteriors have changed as well—where "home-making" and "interior decoration" are newly acquired interests, part of the shift into new housing estates and new towns—part of a new style of urban life. The recent induced spread of hire-purchase is, of course, one way of stimulating a semi-stagnant economy: it is also, however, an attempt—on the part of the Banks and Finance Houses who are best equipped to do so—to catch up with and sustain a current of domestic spending on furniture, household goods and appliances, TV sets, which has been growing, with certain lapses, since the war. At the same time, the older working-class homes survive, much as Hoggart described in *The Uses of Literacy*—warm, cluttered living rooms, impervious to *House and Garden*. Bits and pieces of chain-store furniture have penetrated,

"... the more that distinctions are broken down, the more exquisite they become."

—*The Organization Man*, William Whyte.

but not sufficiently to upset the pattern of life or to destroy the sense of familiar congestion. Where does the old end, and where does the new—the real not the superficially new—begin, in this maze of gradual accommodations?

The third and perhaps most crucial change can be observed in the rhythm and nature of industrial work. Here again, the pace of development offers a picture of extraordinary imbalance. In certain kinds of work, and, consequently, in certain regions of the country, things are much as they were. I am thinking particularly of the heavy industries and of mining. Even here, there have been technological innovations: but these offer themselves very much as modifications of traditional skills in the life of a working man. He is still engaged in labouring directly upon the means of production, in factories where safety regulations may have been improved by legislation, but where factory layout and the work processes have altered little since the last century. Yet side by side with this pattern of industrial labour as Engels and Marx wrote of it, have grown up the "technological" industries—the manufacturing industries based upon chemical and automative processes. Here the very nature of work itself, the rhythm and skills involved, have changed out of all recognition.

Of course, the growth in volume of consumer goods or the council house do not—in themselves—transform a working class into a bourgeoisie. "The working class does not become bourgeois by owning the new products, any more than the bourgeois ceases to be bourgeois as the objects he owns change in kind." (Raymond Williams, *Culture And Society*, p. 324.) It is a matter of a whole way of life, of an attitude towards things and people, within which new possessions—even a new car, a new house or a TV set—find meaning through use. The drive towards a higher standard of living is a legitimate materialism, born out of centuries of physical deprivation and want. It becomes a form of social envy—a desire to become "middle-class" in style of life—only in certain peculiar circumstances. The central distinction between working class and middle class styles of life has always been, as Raymond Williams points out, a distinction "between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationship," embodied, as it were, in typical working class institutions (the Trade Union, the friendly and co-operative societies) as well as in a hundred shared habits, and local, particular responses to life. (See Note 2: Low Life And High Theory.) The crucial difference is that between the bourgeois notion of society as a stage upon which each individual tries to "realise" himself through personal effort and competitiveness; and the working class notion of society as a co-operative entity—where "the primary affections and allegiances, first to family, then to neighbourhood, can in fact be directly extended into social relationships as a whole, so that the idea of a collective democratic society is at once based on direct experience, and is available, as an idea, to others who wish to subscribe to it." (Raymond Williams, 'Working Class Culture,' *ULR* 2.) This is characteristic as a broad generalisation about bourgeois and working class attitudes to life—in spite of the fact that, in the late

19th Century, the bourgeois classes tempered the drive to individualism by a certain liberal and paternal ideal of duty and service ; and in the 20th Century, the notion of 'collective service' in the trade unions has been blunted by a bureaucratic structure of leadership.

Nevertheless, a way of life cannot be sustained without a certain pattern of social relationships, and outside of certain physical, economic and environmental pressures. Working class culture, as we have experienced it, grew up as a series of defences against the encroachments—economic and social—of bourgeois society. The sense of solidarity which developed through work, in the family and the older communities, and which sustained men and women through the terrors of a period of industrialisation—liberating as it was for many—was also, for many, harsh and oppressive. It remained, for all its strengths, a "class" life, a pattern of—in some cases—hastily erected personal and collective barricades. Solid as the old working class communities were, they were often, of necessity, defensive or aggressive towards other communities, other national and racial groups, towards the 'queer' fellow and the 'odd man out,' towards the 'scholarship boy' or even, sometimes, the militant. This is not a matter of praise or blame. It is a matter of the economic and social system within which an industrial proletariat, with its own values and attitudes, matured and grew. Marx understood this. He saw the new social relationships growing within the womb of the old society, he saw them transforming society itself, as men forced themselves out of the constraints which the old industrial ghettos and factories imposed, until the separate communities became a single community, and—in this sense at least—the bourgeois world was 'proletarianised.' (I am not thinking of enforced collectivisation!) He saw an industrial working class not merely *surviving into*, but *itself creating* conditions of prosperity and abundance.

## Class Consciousness

The central problem concerns the different objective factors which shaped and were in turn shaped and humanised by an industrial working class: and the subjective ways in which these factors grew to consciousness within the minds and lives of working people : and the degree to which these shaping factors have changed or are in process of changing. To lump these together as "the economic base" is not enough, though that formulation is broadly true as a proposition, understood over a comparatively long period of history. But we need to break the "economic base" down into constituent factors, permitting a much freer play in our interpretation between "base" and "superstructure." (See Note 3 : Consciousness And The Heavy Industrial Base.) This is necessary because we are concerned with a changing pattern of life, attitudes and values—particular responses to a particular situation—many of which can best be seen and isolated in what has so far been considered, in vulgar-Marxist interpretations (rather patronisingly), as the "ideological superstructure."

Though Marx himself became more deeply involved with objective factors as he elaborated the labour theory of value (an emphasis which Engels was at pains to modify—Cf: the well-known letter to Bloch, *Selected Works*, vol. 2, pp. 443-4, but also the letters to C. Schmidt, pp. 441. 448-50, and to H. Starckenburg, pp. 457-9) a reading of *Capital* will not reveal the clean separation of subjective from objective factors in the growth of the working class. (The early chapters on "Commodities," for example, must be seen in relation to the earlier work on alienation in the

*Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 and the *German Ideology*.) The early industrial working class matured within early entrepreneur capitalism. The key points in this system, for our purposes, were the nature of private property, the accumulation of capital and the exploitation of labour (profits and wages), the alienation of the worker from his labour in the "working day," and his alienation from the products which he made (the "commodity" relationship, where "the more the worker expends himself in work, the more powerful become the world of objects which he creates in fact of himself, the poorer he became in his inner life, the less he belongs to himself." *EPM* (1844), translated in *Karl Marx, Selections* . . . Bottomore & Rubel, p. 70.)

## New Factors

These were the primary factors which shaped the "consciousness of class" amongst working people, and which made it possible for an industrial proletariat to become the base for an active and conscious political movement. Now it is clear that these primary factors have changed radically with the development of capitalism, at least in those sectors of the system which have expanded and been most susceptible to technological and institutional change. They have also changed "subjectively"—i.e., as they present themselves to the consciousness of working people. With the growth of the joint stock firm or corporation, the whole nature of private property has been revolutionised. It can no longer be identified or personalised in the shape of the single industrial magnate, the 'robber baron' or even the entrepreneur family. This does not mean to say that there are no rich men left. But their riches—their pieces of property—are held largely in the form of pieces of *corporate property*, shares in the anonymous, complex, modern industrial firms which spawn their way across the face of modern business. "Property" has gone underground, it has been institutionalised and incorporated, vested nominally in the person of an abstract company or firm. The maximization of profit has passed from the personal responsibility of the businessman or financier, and is now established as the institutional motive of the firm. Further, as the spread of different jobs and functions within a modern firm multiplies, it is difficult for anyone outside to see exactly who is responsible for what. Where do decisions (e.g., to raise prices, alter models, lay off redundant labour, fix salaries and wages) now originate? In the drawing office? In the boardroom? With the advertising agent or the salesman? At the Ministry of Labour or the Board of Trade? Responsibility is difficult to localise. And many young men, drawn into the lower ranks of management, feel that part of the responsibility, at least, is theirs : they 'discover' a responsibility to the firm itself, and, eventually, are drawn into the whole ideology of big corporation business. The spirit which prevails in the multi-product firms, like ICI, Unilevers. Tube Investments, United Steel, Vickers, London Tin, etc., has been justly described as the spirit of "organized irresponsibility."

Secondly, where profits and wages are concerned ("the rate of exploitation") there have been some significant changes, though here the uneven development of which I spoke earlier is more noticeable. Certainly in times of prosperity, wages and living standards *have been seen to rise*—if not continuously, and in many particular spots, as a general trend throughout the society. That is at least the general feeling in the minds of many working people : as such, it gives rise to a different set of emotional responses

to "big business" and to "wage disputes"—it is part of the new "class consciousness." It makes people more responsive to managerial patter about "productivity" and "the responsibility of the firm," and thus leads even the organized trade union movement to a greater involvement with "keeping the firm competitive," with business unionism as practised in the United States than would have been possible under the conditions which Marx foresaw—an increase in the rate of exploitation, a continual decline in real wages, longer working hours, and the proletarianisation of the middle class,

## People's Capitalism

The accumulation of capital and the maximising of profits are still, of course, the organizing principle of the modern large firm. Accumulation, however, is performed in an altogether new way, progressively less through the open money market and more through retained profits (except for large share issues): and although the banks, finance houses and insurance companies are deeply involved in the funding of expansion, this is done more through the 'anonymous' structure of interlocking directorships rather than in the open market. The maximisation of profit is still the driving motive behind the system: but because of the stability of the large firm, it can be considered to take place over a much longer period of "growth": further, it has been tempered by the post-Marx recognition on the part of management that if goods are to be sold, effective domestic demand must be kept up, and the domestic market remain buoyant, provided profit levels can also be maintained. At the present time, for example, where lower and lower prices are being paid to the primary producing countries for raw materials, so that the overseas demand for our goods is falling off, the large firms will be seen to indulge in more "give-away" schemes, and the banks in "cloth-cap" accounts and the finance houses in "bonus" hire purchase offers. These are the mechanisms of a "people's capitalism."

Marx described the alienation of labour thus: ". . . the work is *external* to the worker, that it is not a part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of well-being, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless." Now I am sure that for many kinds of industrial work still performed, this feeling is still true. This would hold, for example, for the steel worker and the miner. But a subtle change of attitude is engendered in those industries where mechanisation and automation can and have been applied. In the first place, the work is not necessarily physically arduous, though it is probably mentally exhausting and repetitive. In many automation processes, even the repetitiveness, has gone. The line between the skilled worker and the minor technologist is breaking down, particularly in industries based on chemical processes. Here the work is of a higher order, demanding skills of comparison of readings, compiling of data for "programmes", etc.: though machines take over the more skills which used to depend on personal craft and individual judgement. This is what J. M. Domenach describes as "work on work", (see *Esprit* Nov. 1957) employing new technological skills. The gross "means of production"—I mean the physical landscape of wheels and machines and exposed conveyor belts which provide the visual and psychological back-

ground of a film like Eisenstein's *Strike*—have disappeared in the technological industries. It is not that "work" is any less *external*, but that the *externality* of work may itself, because of the "higher" skills demanded, and the higher order of human cooperation involved, be accepted as a part of the necessary technical development of the means and skills of industrial labour. It may have been just possible to "humanise" a 19th Century textile shop: it is impossible to "humanise" a computing machine. The transformation of the technical base itself has done its work. Of course, automated work demands a higher level of culture, education and consciousness on the part of a skilled labour force: in this sense the development of the means of production must in turn raise the level of human consciousness, and may make possible, and in turn create the demand for greater participation in all the *human* activities—the "social relations of production"—associated with work. This is the shift which Reisman remarks on as a shift "from the hardness of materials to the softness of men". This change is itself beginning to take place in industry. But whereas Marx saw the "humanisation" of work coming through direct participation and control, including control over ownership, from below, the development in capitalism is towards the "personalisation" of work, through guided participation, excluding ownership, from above. Thus the spread of the ideology of "human relations" and "personnel management" in industry—a conception of worker-management relations which has invaded the more advanced points of British industry (Cf: the ICI schemes, and their persistent advertising campaign on this subject, which soften up public and workers as well.) In the circumstances of which Marx wrote, a brutalised working class within a severe work-discipline were unconscious of the nature of their alienation: today, alienation of labour has been built-in to the structure of the firm itself. "Joint consultation" and "personnel relations" is a form of *false consciousness*, part of the ideology of consumer capitalism, and the rhetoric of scientific management.

## The Habit of Consumption

Marx also spoke of the relationship between the worker and the objects which he produces—the "fetishism of commodities". where "the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself". Iris Murdoch has remarked that Marx's economic theory was the last one which was based on labour and production: since then we have had economic theories based on the consumption. (See "A House of Theory", *Conviction*). Now this is true, but the reasons for this development are to be found, not in the independent development of a body of economic theory, but in the way in which the capitalist system itself, which bourgeois economics had perforce to explain, had itself developed. The factor which Marx fixed upon was the *creation* of alien objects—commodities—which took on an independent life of their own, apart from their *usefulness*—in the commodity market. The worker, because of his low spending power, had little to do with these commodities apart from their production. Today, because of increased purchasing power, the commodities which the worker as *producer* makes at the factory, he purchases back as a *consumer* in the shops. Indeed, consumption has been so built into capitalism that it has become the most significant relationship between the working class and the employing class. (This involves the working class capitulating to the root self-image of man in capitalist society. See C. Taylor's article in this issue.) The worker *knows himself* much

more as consumer than as producer : prices now appear a cleaner form of exploitation than wages. This is the role in which the capitalist system has annexed an entire class to itself: so much so that it appears to the working class now enjoying a higher level of consumption than ever before, that to break the system at the point of production (e.g. to reintroduce the concept of production for usefulness) would be to cut off his nose to spoil his face — as a consumer. The purpose of a great deal of advertising, for example, is to condition the worker to the new possibilities for consumption, to break down the class resistances to consumer-purchase which became part of working class consciousness at an earlier period. This is known in the world of advertising as "sales resistance". ("When you buy your second car, make sure it's a Morris").

## Status Value

Further, in an era of expanded consumer demand, the alienation of commodities has gone a stage further than Marx foresaw. Not only have objects produced taken on an existence independent from their production as *economic things* in the market ; not only has the working class been built into the market itself : but commodities — things-in-themselves — have accumulated a *social value* as well. They have become insignias of class and status. Through the purchase and display of certain kinds of consumer-goods, which have gathered for themselves *status value*, a working class family can define its social standing in relation to other families (if they live in a neighbourhood where such things matter): they can even — so the advertisers suggest — raise their class position by buying the right kinds of goods. Of course, in relation to the new managerial groups which have grown up in industry (see Peter Shore's "In The Room At The Top", *Conviction*) or the owners of industrial property, the gap between exploited and exploiters may well be the same, — or at least not substantially altered. But the *sense of difference* has been blunted — partly because there are now more opportunities for people to work within big business in positions of limited responsibility (what is now referred to as "middle management".) Thus in their lives and their work, working class and lower middle class people can *realise* themselves through the possession (on hire purchase perhaps) of "alien things". Capitalism as a social system is now based upon consumption. Both in consumption and production, the working class is gradually becoming factors in its own permanent alienation.

Whilst it may have been true, in the past, as Raymond Williams argues, that "the working class does not become bourgeois by owning the new products", that working class culture is a "whole way of life" not reducible to its artefacts, it may now be less and less true, because the "new things" *in themselves* suggest and imply a way of life which has become objectified *through them*, and may even become desirable because of their social value. In those places in welfare Britain where the working class has been put directly in touch with "the new opportunities", the "whole way of life" is breaking down into several *styles of living* (this is the language of the furnishing advertisements), each imperceptibly but, as William Whyte says, "exquisitely" differentiated one from another. The very fact that it is sometimes difficult to disentangle one "style" from another (e.g. what "style" is one purchasing when one buys, for example, Times Furnishings, C. & A. styles, or Marks & Spencers, where the prices are comparatively low but the fashions are up-to-the-minute?) adds to the general sense of class-confusion.

The more clearly we grasp the particular ways in which the sense of solidarity and community sustained life in the older working class localities, the more sharply will we see the degree of anxiety and confusion which attends the new "classlessness". When the old sense of class begins to break up, and while a new pattern of class emerges, the society is not merely fluid — it can be made to appear more free and "open". The working class boy must find his way through a maze of strange signals. For example, the 'scholarship boy', who retains some sense of allegiance to his family and community, has constantly to draw the distinction within himself between the just motive of self-improvement (which took him to university in the first place) and the false motive of self-advancement ("room at the top".) This is because culture, education and learning, like the other 'commodities' of our society have accreted to themselves a social value in a hierarchy of status symbols. To learn or to read is no longer a process through which the individual broadens and deepens his experience for its own sake (processes which, when they grow out of a genuine community, a "whole way of life", are perfectly compatible with a working class way of life) : they are, in themselves, modes of propulsion up the status ladder. Books imply different — and "exquisitely" differentiated — styles of living. Thus, instead of the continuous broadening out of culture, as living standards improve and the means of production are technically developed, there is a cultural discontinuity in the community — a gap between an increasingly skilled working class and the riches of culture, which now properly belong to that class — which the creep of social opportunity cannot bridge.

## Creeping up the Ladder

For once the working class has set tentative feet on the status ladder, once the notion of the ladder itself has entered its consciousness as a necessary part of life, there is nothing left but perpetual forms of striving — not the open, brutal struggle of the period of primary accumulation — (a Morgan against a Rockefeller) — but the blander, more inner, nervous inconspicuous struggle of a period of public consumption — (a Smith against a Jones). The ladder sorts out the community into a series of separate, competing individuals: for a class *as a class* cannot advance by means of it. We must each go it alone. And, even when there are more opportunities for self-advancement around, they can only be seized at the expense of someone else. By means of the image of a social ladder, the other images of bourgeois life — individualism, privacy, "the spirit of healthy competition", "cultivating one's own garden" (Mr. Crosland's metaphor for happiness), "a property owning democracy" — finally enter working class consciousness. As many working class men and women said to us, when we enquired about the growth of community life in the new towns — "What do you have a home for, if you don't stay in it?" Or as a skilled maintenance operative, who had moved to a new town from South London, remarked — "I wanted a house and a bit of space around it: after all, that's what we came for. People are too close to you — breathing down your necks . . ." And we thought of Bethnal Green. The image of a "property owning democracy", and the complex of emotions contained in that contradictory phrase, is now the point of deepest conflict today within the working class (individual opportunity against the concept of the improvement of the whole community.)

When, in his extraordinary perceptive Chapter at the end of *Culture and Society*, (in the section "The Develop-

ment of A Common Culture"), Raymond Williams speaks of "the conversion of the defensive element of solidarity into the wider and more positive practice of neighbourhood", he is thinking of a genuine broadening out of the idea of working class solidarity, and its development in an ever widening "community" which would eventually embrace the whole society. Nevertheless, one should be careful about the concept of "neighbourhood" as it is customarily projected in a consumer capitalist society. For intense personal rivalries over status and "style of life" can flourish and bloom within the "neighbourhood" idea as it has grown up in the United States: where there may be "neighbourhood" facilities to be "consumed" by all, where there is no sharp sense of class, but where there are "exquisite" distinctions of status. Something of this kind appears to be happening, where the shift in consciousness from production to consumption is heightened by a change or improvement in neighbourhood; for example, in new towns, in the expanding suburbs and dormitory towns, and on the large housing estates in welfare Britain. "Homemaking" and "gardening" are not community skills, but subtle modes of status differentiation and striving, a new kind of individualism which enters working class lives, so to speak, "with the new furniture, *Woman's Realm* and *The Practical Householder*". In the subtlest and more complicated ways, the new capitalism recognizes and tries to cater for, at least in *form*, the human problems of industrial society, which in *substance* socialism first named. But these are only falsely attended to, resulting in a false consciousness in working class people, making the real problems not only more difficult to solve but *more difficult to see*. Thus, while the large corporations have not replaced competition by cooperation, they are pre-occupied with the "spirit of collectiveness". The human need for participation and control in industry has been

sublimated into the practice of "human relations." And since a common culture and a genuine community has not been permitted to develop, the genuine human needs which have hitherto been expressed through these terms have been watered down into "the need for neighbourliness" (what Riesman calls "the glad hand" — but what, in an English new town was described as "a cheery good morning"), "the sense of belonging" (to whom? for what?), "togetherness". This is part of the same process of cultural degeneration which Hoggart describes in the *Uses of Literacy* ("Unbending The Springs Of Action"): from a genuine sense of tolerance to a false sense of 'freedom', (from "live and let live" to "anything goes"), from a genuine sense of community to a false identification with the group, (from "everybody mucks in" to "the gang's all here"), from a true sense of the present to a false sense of the 'contemporary,' (from "enjoy y'self while y'can" to "we've never had it so good".) The process is far advanced in Britain: and what I have been trying to argue is that, since its roots are only in part to be discovered in changes in working class culture, and can also be seen in the social and economic system within which culture grows, this process of degeneration has deeper sources than has so far been discovered.

Of course the sense of class confusion which I have been describing does not mean that there are no classes left. But where the subjective factors determining "class consciousness" alter radically, a working class can develop a false sense of "classlessness". The true class picture, which so skilfully conceals itself behind the bland face of contemporary capitalism, is broadly speaking that which C. Wright Mills describes in *The Power Elite* (See the Chapter on *The Mass Society*). It consists, on the one hand, of a number of interpenetrating elites or narrow

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oligarchies, whose functions within capitalism are different, but who share a common "style of life", a common ideology, and a common economic interest through the "mutual care" of corporate private property: on the other hand, a permanently exploited, permanently alienated "mass" of consumers (consuming goods and culture equally). This "mass" has been, if you like, "proletarianised"—not, as Marx thought *downwards* towards minimum wage levels, but *upwards* towards roughly middle-class styles of living. In the process, however, the old middle class and the old industrial proletariat are, gradually, ceasing to exist. (There are important distinctions, both in structure and habits, between the British and the American "power elites", which deserve studies of their own).

## A Series of Life Styles

Both Hoggart and Williams rightly protest against the use of the terms "mass" and "masses" (See *Culture & Society*, p.297-312). "Masses", as Williams argues, is a kind of formula for progressive manipulation of anonymous groups of people—"our listeners", "our readers", "viewers". "There are in fact no masses: there are only ways of seeing people as masses". (p.300). But what we need to ask is not "who are the masses?" but "why is it necessary in our society for people to be seen, and be persuaded to see themselves as 'the masses'?" It is necessary because this sense of classlessness, which can only be engendered by the persuasive use of a formula, must exist before people will accept their own cultural and economic exploitation. They have to be made accessories after the fact. This is the context in which we should understand the discussion about "the mass media", about advertising and culture. Every form of communication which is concerned with altering attitudes, which changes or confirms opinions, which instils new images of the self, is playing its part. They are not peripheral to the "economic base": they are part of it. (It is significant that some of the most important recent technological advances have been made in what is now called "the communications industry", and that this side of big business is where the labour force is expanding most rapidly.) That fact in itself should make us seriously rework our ideas of the ways in which (as Engels, that arch-revisionist, put it) the super-structures "exercise their influence upon the course of the

historical struggles" and the conditions within which "the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary". (*Letter to Block*, op.cit.)

The break-up of a "whole way of life" into a series of life-styles, (so-called "lower-middle class" unfolding into "middle-middle class", and so on, upwards) means that life is now a series of fragmented patterns for living for many working class people. One cannot organise militantly to keep up with the Joneses. Moreover, many must feel a personal repugnance against involving themselves with a series of interlocking rat-races. But what else can they do? Self-improvement and self-advancement are now parts of the same process. That is the message of the capitalism of the proletariat. That is the tragic conflict within a working class which has freed itself only for new and more subtle forms of enslavement.

The fact that these forms of enslavement are mental and moral as well as material: the fact that they are taking shape at a period when greater leisure and comparative improvements in living standards are becoming possible—these point to the central paradox of contemporary capitalism with which socialists have now to deal. Marx suggested that complete alienation of man would not take place until the means of complete freedom themselves existed within the womb of society. In my view—and I would reiterate the discontinuity in the experience of classlessness between different regions and different industries of which I spoke at the very beginning—we are on the edge of some such moment in history. (The gap between some countries and the rest in this matter is, of course, the greatest human challenge of the age: but it deserves detailed treatment of its own.) Within the industrial countries, the material and technological means for complete human freedom—a freedom within which man could develop a true individuality and a true consciousness of himself and his possibilities—are *almost* to hand. But the structure of human, social and moral relationships are in complete contradiction and have to be set over against our material advances, when we are reckoning them up. Until we can throw over the system within which these relationships take place, and the kind of consciousness which feeds the system and upon which it feeds, the working class will be men as things for other people, but they can never be men for themselves.

## Notes

### NOTE 1: The Post-War Boom.

It is often said that the phenomena I am discussing are part of a false period of prosperity connected with the post-war boom: that it will fall off, and be overtaken by a series of economic crises of the old kind. I have heard "the coming slump" predicted on four occasions by so-called militants since coming to England (1951). I am not impressed. I do not mean by that that I consider contemporary capitalism to be completely insulated against economic crisis. But I think it is time that we learned to reckon with the remarkable growth of stability and concentration within the system: the fact that it can and has changed in the light of periodic slumps in the past—the reasons for which, paradoxically enough, were most effectively pointed out by socialists: and the

fact that the new power elites in Britain and the United States are probably the smartest and most far-seeing that have ever been in the business. Furthermore, the attitudes and changes which I discuss here are structural and institutional changes within capitalism: they have been running parallel to, they have been fed by—but they are different from the "welfare state" itself, considered as a system of social security—a structure which could admittedly, and indeed has already begun to, break up either through political malice on the part of a ruling class, or in response to a downturn in economic activity. Contemporary capitalism *may* disappear if the welfare state disappeared: at least, people's consciousness of economic matters would certainly be affected by a long period of hardship. But if what I have been arguing is true.

if the working class has itself, to some degree, been seduced into playing a complementary role to capitalism, then the changes in social attitudes run deeper than talk about a "temporary period of prosperity" would suggest. One is not any less against the system because one suggests that, in many important respects, it has changed. That smear is a form of subtle political blackmail.

### NOTE 2: Low Life And High Theory.

To my mind, there has always been this kind of connection—understressed by Marx—between the life which working class people made for themselves in an industrial society, and the body of socialist theory which grew out of it. This interpenetration of experience and theory is what really lies behind much of the talk about "theory and practice."

It can best be seen in the somewhat cloudy but centrally important realm of "humanist values." There is no space at this point to trace out in detail what the connection has been: it is to be found, at least in part, in those sections of *The Uses Of Literacy* which many socialists have discounted as "not political enough." The important point is this: that socialism cannot develop as a set of ideas or as a programme without a matrix of values, a set of assumptions, a base in experience which give them validity. There have to be some points of "recognition"—where the abstract planning meets sharply with human needs as people experience them *in the here and now*. That is why it is not possible to postpone the problem of socialism until after the revolution. Socialism has always existed within capitalist society—at least in so far as working class life offered itself as a set of alternate values, as a different image of the community, as a critique, to bourgeois life. We are making the socialism of tomorrow today: it is potential in the lives of ordinary people—working class and others—who resist and reject, both intellectually and in experience, the values of a capitalist society. Unless the values of working class experience can find new forms and thrive in the new conditions of consumption and prosperity which we have been discussing, socialist ideas will eventually dry up and disappear. Every day, in our own lives, in our personal relations with people, and our impersonal relations to things, we are making and destroying socialism itself.

*NOTE 3: Consciousness And The Heavy Industrial Base.*

The model of "base and superstructure" is—or ought to be—at the heart of every "rethinking" and "revisionist" controversy. It seems clear to me, on the one hand, that the simplistic economic-determinist reading of this formula has now to be discarded: it

means that too much of importance has to be left out of our analysis. It is too blunt and imprecise an instrument. On the other hand, it is clear that some such organic relationship exists between "the way we make our life" and "the way we see ourselves"—and that, without such a framework of understanding, we may get a series of brilliant socialist programmes (perhaps), but no kind of socialist humanism. This article is, in part, an attempt to use the interpenetration of base and superstructure as an analytic framework for a discussion of some tendencies in contemporary capitalism. But the ideological discussion needs to go much further. Clearly, there are points at which "ideas," or "a structure of assumptions" directly impinge upon and affect, if not the nature of the 'economic base,' then certainly the way it behaves, and even its development over fairly long periods of history. Furthermore, there are periods when cultural alienation and exploitation become so ramified and complex, that they take on an independent life of their own, and need to be seen and analysed as such. What is more, there is a large area of personal choice, of conscious moral decisions made in certain moral situations—questions which E. P. Thompson refers to as concerning "agency and choice" (See *New Reasoner*, 5)—which we cannot slip or slide over by means of some convenient theory of economic inevitability.

I think the confusion is, in part, due to certain ambiguities which attend Marx's use of this analytic tool, in different parts of his work and at different periods of his life. The concept certainly took on, in the later years, a rigidity—due, in part, to the fact that he was dealing specifically with economic facts and causes—which is not to be found in his earlier work. Certainly there is no simplicity of analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* or the *History of*

*The Class Struggles in France*. It would be of immense value if the whole body of the earlier studies—particularly the untranslated and, one suspects, unfashionable *Economic And Philosophical Manuscripts*—were restored to their proper place. At least in the earlier writings on "alienation" we need to give a different weight or emphasis to "superstructure" than we would imagine simply from a study of *Capital*.

My plea is, at least, that "revisionism" should begin with this concept, and that it should start in Marx's work itself, which is a body of analytic concepts and not a sealed house of theory. Engels plays, in the development of the base-superstructure controversy a most significant "revisionist" role. E.g. "... According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase." "... "We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions." (*Letter To Bloch*, passim.) The letter ends—a timely warning—"Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle vis-a-vis our adversaries. . . . Unfortunately, however, it happens only too often that people think they have fully understood a new theory and can apply it without more ado from the moment they have mastered its main principles, and even those not correctly. And I cannot exempt many of the more recent "Marxists" from this reproach, for the most amazing rubbish has been produced in this quarter too." (*Selected Works*, vol. 2, P. 443-4).