

## Class and Stonehenge

The essay you are about to read is concerned with class but not just the grand, overarching, structures that organise our social life. Class in my story is about how it shaped my life and how the events of a house party provided the micro-events of class and how it shaped my feelings. Running alongside my description of the house party are commentaries whose aim is to put the events of the day into some kind of broader context.

The events I am going to relate began with a journey, a journey that started in one of the lesser-known London suburbs. Gradually trees replaced houses and at last we arrived in the *countryside*. My life in London meant that months could roll by without my ever catching even a glimpse of anything rural. We were travelling at night so we couldn't see much of the agricultural land we were moving through. The car we were travelling in was rented. In 1967 ownership of a car was out of reach for most of us, as was someone with the ability to drive. There were four of us, all about the same age, and distributed variously across the English class system. All of us had benefited from the expansion that had taken place in Higher Education and that meant we all had had a University education. Our driver was Madeline. She had done a literature degree at Hull University and then had moved to London as soon as possible. She was very reserved and my guess was she that was Home Counties middle class but in revolt against her family circumstances. Her partner was Jock. He was the eldest of us and was already doing a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics. He was working class but I can't recall him ever making a directly personal remark about his class origins. Later, I shared a house with him and I became familiar with his intellectual cum political activity. He was a gifted thinker and the sort of student who put together his intellectual direction very soon after completing his

undergraduate degree. He loved music but would only play the Bob Dylan and The Rolling Stones on his sound system. Sharing the back seat with me was my friend Duffy. He was the same age as me and had entered LSE at the same time. He originated from South West England, Devon I think. He had inherited from his family the style of the upper class, but it was a family that now lived in a 'council house' and had little in the way of material wealth. He was a daredevil who was unafraid of all forms of authority; an extremely intelligent individual and an immense amount of fun to be with. Finally we arrive at me, the author. Like the others I was a graduate of the L.S.E. and something of a swot. I had worked assiduously at my degree despite disliking what it was I had to study. Unlike others I knew, my time as an undergraduate failed to provide me with a pathway into the future. My unfamiliarity with riding in a car was surely an indication of my lack of worldly experience that would colour so much of what was to come. Even after three-years at LSE my sense of those around me was a matter of differences in personalities, not class. My rather colourless class position had none of the muscular anecdotes that would appear when we were together in the local pub. There were some occasions when I would invent amusing family stories to gain a degree of social credit.

Even now the break in my recollection of sitting in the car to standing in the middle of Stonehenge remains a mystery. I can't recollect whether there'd been a plan to visit the stones, if there were such a plan my guess is that I was the one who suggested it. I had been a student of stone circles since schooldays and had visited Stonehenge a number of times although it was a new experience to visit the stones at night. We were all creatures of LSE, of an institution that was unremittingly secular. Our time there had stripped us of any transcendental leanings so that the stones remained simply stones. (Me less so.) As we wandered

around we discovered that we were not alone. A considerable crowd had assembled around one stone in particular. I guessed that they were all waiting for the sunrise and this was the favoured rock that marked the moment of the summer solstice.

My subsequent recollection is that the journey begins again by the time the sun had come up. None of us had any sleep and we all must have started to get that prickly feeling at the back of our eyes. The car had pulled off the main road and was travelling down an unmade track that had fields on either side. Eventually we arrived at a house I guessed was our destination. From the outside it resembled a rather comfortable sofa and as I was to discover, comfort would be the organising principle for the rest of the house. It was then that I realized we were about to be pitched into a house party that only Jock and Duff had been given clear invitations. (I had thought Stonehenge was our destination.) Where that left me I was never to fully resolve. All I knew was that I loathed parties especially one's in strange places with strange people.

I have a clear recollection of the sound made by our car as it drew up in front of the house. Like so many events and situations I encountered during the day this was the first time I had heard the actual sound of gravel being crushed under the wheels of a car. Low budget TV crime thrillers of the 1960's were wedded to the trio of mansion, car and gravel and a general feeling of luxury and menace. I had no way of telling whether I might find either of these things when we got inside.

We were met by an unusual (well to me she was unusual.) looking woman who seemed to have guessed at our time of arrival, despite that we were two hours early. What made her appearance interesting was the way she dressed. Her

clothes were neither ones associated with youthfulness but nor was she dressed in the conventional clothes worn by middle-aged women. Her 'dress' fell straight down to the floor and made no attempt to follow the shape of her body. It had swirling abstract fields of colour but nowhere was there any traces of conventional patterns. Her hair was straight and hung down almost to her waist. The only woman I knew of her age was my mother and nothing could have been more different than Mum's style of dress.

We were led into what I guessed to be the kitchen and sat down waiting for our promised breakfasts to arrive. (I'm going to try and avoid continual comparisons between 'superlatives' of the house and what I was used to at home.) The kitchen was enormous as was the table we were sitting at. Attached to the kitchen shelves were rows of robust looking, colourful crockery and hanging down numerous copper cooking utensils. The organisation of the kitchen, let alone its size, dwarfed the kitchen-dining room I was used to at home. The space in which we were eating our breakfasts so overwhelmed me that I spent more time inspecting its architecture than eating the breakfast placed in front of me.

Having finished eating our hostess invited us to make ourselves comfortable on the many sofas scattered throughout the house. It was still early so we were not likely to be disturbed by any of the sleeping residents. We set off in different directions in search of sofas where we could shake Stonehenge out of our dreams. I had no idea how long I had been asleep but I was awakened by the loud music coming from a sophisticated sound system in the corner of the room. I recognised the person playing the music as someone younger than me but someone who I had seen in passing at LSE. His choice of music was limited to one

band that he played so many times that day that it's lodged in my memory even though I've never heard of it since. It was an obscure English rock band called *Family*. Over the years I have occasionally searched for the music I heard that afternoon but with no success. Looking back on the 'wall of sound' coming from the music room I should have realised that there must have been a degree of familiarity between the 'musician' and the other inhabitants of the house who might have been used to his musical habits. No shouts of 'Turn it down!' It wasn't long before the music drove me from the room and into the garden and sunshine where the party was getting under way.

The garden was not an area that was tended all that much. It consisted of a few gnarled fruit trees set within a scrubby covering of grass. Tables and chairs had been placed in different spots and each table was covered with a generous supply of food and drink. I guessed that it was for this the reason that each table had small groups of guests standing a round them. I stood at the top of the few steps that lead from the room where I had been sleeping and moved down into the body of the guests.

It was not long before I began to recognise some of the guests. First were a number of LSE academics I could remember from lecture theatres and tutorial rooms. Straight away the thought of joining a group made up of these individuals was out of the question. Lost for words would hardly sum up the situation I would inevitably myself in. Not all of us were suffering from the reticence that had got a hold on me. Jock was engaged in conversation with a number of academics presumably attached to his PhD. Duff's usual confidence was evident in the conversation he was sharing with another middle aged male who was certain to be a celebrity academic of some sort. This left Madeleine and I

marooned, desperately looking for someone to talk to, or a place to vanish into. As the afternoon progressed things I began to notice something rather unsettling. The 'music man' turned out to be the son of our hosts who was also an LSE academic. (At this stage I had no knowledge about the person who had first welcomed us.) Things got even more complicated when I discovered that the two people I knew-certainly closer than simply nodding at one other in the corridor – Sarah was the offspring of the people throwing the party whilst Anne was a childhood friend and so knew all the members of the family along with the layout of the house. The knowledge that my two LSE friends, who I met regularly in the bar on Friday nights, were doubly joined to the upper echelons of the LSE froze me. The immediate situation I found myself in multiplied my native reticence/awe ten fold. Rather than looking for some conviviality, I searched for somewhere that would get me through the party undamaged.

Here my recollection ends.

### Commentaries

Home life with my parents lacked any of the emotional disturbances that are supposed to be part of one's teenage years. I was not particularly concerned with the outside world, certainly nothing like an awareness that I belonged to such a thing as class. I can't recall there being any overt commentary made about the class identity of our family. However, there was one occasion where I caught a glimpse of the operations of class. Every year the school staged a cricket match between Boys and Fathers. I can't remember why Dad volunteered to play for the Boys side (They must have been a man short and the Fathers were one too many.) but he did, and so we settled down to watch the match. When we got to the changing room I saw that most of the players, both the Fathers and the Boys, were dressed in cricket whites. Some were even wearing regular cricket caps-

which even then I found ridiculous. This was the moment I knew that Dad and I were of a different species to those in cricket whites. Dad had no whites and was bowled out first ball. I was very uncomfortable as to how he had lost his wicket but what I saw was a group of individuals, many of who turned out to be friends, and whose behaviour towards us was pure snobbery. As the afternoon unfolded the Fathers formed themselves into closed groups, with hardly a word being spoken to Dad. The sudden insight I had into the meaning of this snobbery and its place in the mechanics of class would last for only a short while. By the time we arrived back home no more was said about the events of the match. Many years were to pass before my feelings of that afternoon remerged but this time in a very different context. Then it would be the reverse of my earlier encounter with snobbery that would reveal it to be the force behind my feelings of inferiority. Somewhere, and somehow, I must have agreed that there was a truth in snobbery. They were superior and so I must be inferior. Thus is deference born.

## Quantity

My ideas about the relationship between class and quantity rest on a simple comparison I made between quantity and my parents home where the contrast is between more than enough and only just enough. Whilst it is possible for the possession of a single valued item is able to carry considerable class importance, it is probable that ownership of a quantity of these items is more likely to have superior class weight. Two encounters with quantity occurred during the day of the party. First was the size of the house. At a guess there must have been many more rooms than the few we had wandered through when looking for places to sleep. Both the kitchens were being used to prepare the afternoon's food and drink. Then there were the multiple bathrooms and bedrooms and presumably there was still plenty of space left over for personal studies and music rooms, etc.

This was in contrast to the cramped layout of the rooms in our family home. It was impossible for anyone playing a musical instrument without the rest of the house hearing it and its quantity of overall space would never have impressed in the way the house I was stranded in would.

Quantity, in the form of the amount of food and drink laid out on the garden tables, also unsettled me. I had never seen that amount of food in one place and at one time. What I found extraordinary was that what was being offered never seemed to diminish no matter how often the guests helped themselves. (Much later, I remembered that I had overlooked the presence of the young waitresses carrying food from the house and clearing away any used plates and glasses.) It was at this point that quantity, as well as the lack of it, started me wondering how it placed within the social order. Looking back on the afternoon, it became clear social power, social position, was something that could accompany generosity. What was important was the flow of food. Our home could never hope to match the expenditure of resources on display at the party. My mother would always take up a defensive posture in the face of such affluence. She always thought such displays of wealth vulgar, which even now seems to be a completely appropriate response.

### Deference

The reader may recall that I hesitated introducing myself to the academics in the garden, some of whom I recognised as being my lecturers and others who were my past tutors. This conjunction of past and present is one of the places where class creates a spark between class differences. It is where class becomes tangible, ceases to be abstract, often shaping something as simple as a face-to-face encounter. In the example of my reticence towards past teachers, power of some kind must be present because it is power that gives deference its impetus.



Deference happens when one party occupies, or is placed in, a position of superiority. It is an exchange between those who defer and those who deserved being deferred to. There was one moment of deference during that afternoon and this was when I caught sight of the academics I knew from the LSE. My reaction was to quickly find a place to hide and so render my miserable scholarship' invisible. To acknowledge them would require maybe a doffing of my head and a handshake of daunting complexity. Duff, on the other hand, made straight for the academic who interested him the most and then stayed glued to these academics of choice for the remainder of the afternoon. One feature of a possible deferential encounter was the deferring party might feel that they had been stripped of all of their social accomplishments. The act of deferral is that loss. For me, stumbling across the academics in the garden left me feeling that I had lost all of my status, that I had nothing to offer. Deference is different to its close cousin snobbery. Snobbery is unearned superiority whilst deference is something more deeply entrenched and will often draw upon tradition and ceremony to exhibit its legitimacy. But to treat the afternoon as simply one unpleasant event after another would be to overlook the pleasures that were available in the house. Within the house physical comfort was available in the form of countless sofas. In the garden was an unending flow of food and drink. Music was available even if it did become irritating as the afternoon wore on. All of these things were offered with no rule, no limit, being imposed on their consumption. Again, it was much later that I understood there was a scrambling of my original class-consciousness with a desire to become middle class. Who would turn away from all the comforts on offer by this middle class way of life, typified by what I came across that summer afternoon. Maybe this attraction/repulsion was why social classes could hold a position of deference in relation to one another. Why deference had, below the surface, an element of envy.

## Class Awareness

For many years I only had a very simple idea of what class was. Upper class and working class, with the middle class squeezed in between was about as sophisticated as I could manage. These two forces, the upper class and the working class, manoeuvred around one another with the upper class, helped by the middle class, always outwitting the working class in the form of the various forms taken by the Labour Party. This, of course, was nothing more than a comic book version of class. It's all about identifying the content of the armouries held by each class but very little about *why* class exists at all. Years later (When writing this essay) I realised that the gathering I had been a guest at was solidly upper middle class. The party was as high as I had ever been on the class ladder. The young LSEers, who were my friends, acquired a class identity and were the offspring who would ensure the perpetuation of their class. The house, its interiors and the guests shed their immediate meaning and took on another life as emblems of class. Perhaps they were the intelligentsia's version of the snotty-nosed bastards who had bowled Dad.

(Extended note on the origins of class.

This is an anecdote told by Karl Marx in, I think, some of the journalism he wrote for The New York Daily Tribune.

An old man and his grandson were one day sailing down the Rhine in that stretch of the river where there were castles perched high up on the ground on either bank. The young boy looked up and pointed to the castle high above them. 'Grandfather who owns that castle?' asked the young boy. 'It 's owned by the Count von Doodlebug' replied the grandfather. 'And how did he get it grandfather?' 'He got it from his father'. 'And who did he get it from? Asked the boy. The grandfather, at last losing patience with his grandson, shouted 'Oh! He just took it'.)

## More thoughts

There was one thing of that afternoon I failed to understand, or at least how I understood it at the time was well wide of what subsequently proved to be so shocking. The people gathered in the garden, the younger set listening to music and us, the visitors fresh from Stonehenge, we were all, in one way or another, connected to the LSE. But it wasn't the cleaners, nor the cooks, or even the administrative staff who were gathered in the garden. The actual guests were either academics who I knew to be LSE lecturers, their friends and their offspring. Those friends I had made whilst an undergraduate would later be revealed to be a younger generation poised to fill the teaching positions occupied by their parents, or move into equivalent positions requiring a university level of education. My familial origins provided no such launch pad into my future. At the time I remembered struggling to understand the not inconsiderable number of people associated by kinship and occupation with the LSE. The only exception among the guests - and I never knew if she was a guest or not- was the person who had greeted us when we arrived and who fed us breakfast so early in the morning. Her appearance stood out amongst all the corduroy and tweed, as someone whose dress originated from a very different aesthetic to the men around her. I have no recollection of ever seeing her again that afternoon and so I can only guess as to where she fitted into the dynamics of the house. I have discussed female 'artistic' dress in other places in my work, for that is what I think she was wearing. My guess is that she was the 'house mother', the person organising the small number of waitresses whose were responsible for keeping the food and drink 'topped up'.

The party over, I returned home. All I had gathered about these 'unities' of kinship and occupation was that they were joined in some way. Most of the adult males were academics employed by the LSE. In my eyes it was a place peopled by gifted individuals, along with those who supported them in their precious activities. My understanding went no further than an overwhelming admiration I felt whenever I encountered these people inside, or outside, the tutorial room. It was an understanding that put the academics at the top of an educational pyramid and who were supported by *everything else* that made up the LSE. I remained unaware of the significance of that 'everything else'.

I carried this simple notion that the material composition of LSE –bricks, mortar and lifts, etc.- was primarily there to secure an institutional hierarchy of the intellect. I was aware of the physical presence of LSE. After all I had walked through the main doors on most days when I was an undergraduate. I also knew about the historical dimension of the LSE- as did everyone- its left leaning reputation that it had right from its inception. Nothing would replace my understanding that the LSE was an institution for housing academics. I had no understanding of those broader regions, dimensions that for the most part proved to be political in nature.

I can't remember when I began to expand my understanding with something that went beyond the two understandings I have outlined above. One thing I was aware of was that LSE, despite its name, was a university amongst universities. It had shared in the considerable expansion of higher education and despite its age and the snobbery that surrounded it, as an LSE undergraduate I too was part of the dramatic increase in the enrolments that government money had made possible. But the age of LSE (Established in 1898) trumped the 'new' universities

that were all built post-war. This appeal to tradition, including its reputation as a left leaning place, obscured the political dimension that it occupied as a *social* institution. The myth surrounding LSE obscured its role as a producer of recruits for the new bureaucracies needed by the State. One thing was certain, this expansion of higher education was not undertaken simply to provide the raw recruits of young people coming down the line with a traditional education. Overwhelmingly, subjects taught at the school were subjects like economics, politics and the Social Sciences all of which engaged directly with the contemporary world. There was urgency about getting those previously excluded from higher education installed in the new universities, something that was made easier not least because we received adequate funding to cover the duration of our studies. This was a much-needed response to help the country out of the wartime devastation. LSE was always part of this huge change in the British educational system. It bent the English class system but did not break it. Once more, LSE was, and always had been, part of the British class system, somewhere about the middle of the middle class. There must have been a point in my later life when I began to change the way I remembered the party. I would eventually draw those LSE guests (and even their offspring) into some basic class coordinates. As well as the economic and political rank class values were ascribed to dress, food, interiors, and cultural tastes in general. These class coordinates were manifest in the differences in male and female dress. All very different to the world of my upper working class parents. The differences between the classes, differences that were particularly in Britain, was openly recognised in drama, film and literature. The currency between the classes, whether going up or going down, is power. The LSE academics were members of the intelligentsia, which had traditionally held sway over the realm of ideas, and crucially, over education. But the price paid for by the benefactors of this

intellectual privilege was political ineffectiveness. Power is not spread evenly over the social body and some groups, like the intelligentsia, have more localised power than other sectors of the economy. But this is a regional power that is limited in its ability to shape the world that is its remit. Thus does a garden party become an upper middle class gathering.

### Final Note

A telling omission on my part was that throughout the afternoon the supplies of drink and food were being both renewed, and handed around, by a group of four or five waitresses who were young, and almost the same age as me. This maybe the reason why I had never again seen the woman who had greeted us in the morning. She must have been organising the waitresses to ensure that the food and drink kept flowing. The wave of female displeasure, particularly amongst the intelligentsia, was about to break but not quite yet.