

THE CLASS SYSTEM AGAINST
COMPETITION*

MICHAEL BURRAGE has enlarged his usual scope on professions to write this very ambitious book. We cannot assume that many readers will agree with the bulk of his work, but his partly new vision of the class and state as a network, which eradicates class conflict, deserves interest and consideration. The aim is a macro-sociological one with a very large focus, encompassing at least three centuries and four countries in a comparative perspective. Burrage is familiar with a great swathe of historical literature (in both the French and German language), and his principal thesis is clear: states and rulers – be they kings, presidents or chancellors – were by and large much more powerful and efficient in building and eventually destroying social classes than were blind economic forces and/or unequal social relations in the workplace. Everyone knows that the concept of “class” refers to segments of European societies – identified by a combination of jobs, lifestyles, education, cultural values and wealth – which appeared in the literature towards the end of the 19th century. However, the impact of Marxism and class struggle remains predominant up to today, even among social scientists who do not believe in historical materialism or “Diamat” at all.

On the basis of the title, one could expect that the four countries of interest would receive equal treatment. That is not exactly the case. The author begins his investigation from a definitely British standpoint. Slightly before the final chapters it becomes clear that we are witnessing something similar to a criminal charge against Margaret Thatcher for having purposely destroyed, step by step, British class structure, central to the functioning of its civil society. Of course the battle against the miners in the early 1980s and the defeat of the trade unions comes to mind. The Iron Lady also fought against other bastions, including the professions.

At the beginning, Burrage discusses several theories concerning the classes, more or less widely accepted by sociologists. He rejects E.O. Wright outright, claiming that he did not add any value to classic Marxism. Those who have read Wright will be more than surprised. In contrast, Milovan Djilas’ “new class” concept is treated favourably.

* About Michael BURRAGE, *Class Formation, Civil Society and the State* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

With this concept, Djilas demonstrates a link between the dominant political sphere and the economic and social ones. One can easily discern the influence of the model of government invented by Peter I, founder of a Russian nobility, whose privileges derived from their position either in the army or in the civil service. Burrage's pragmatic definition of class is simple and loose. Quoting E.P. Thompson, he writes: "something which in fact happens and can be shown to have happened in human relationships".

The argument is supposed to be supported by the convergence of elements drawn from the four cases. International comparisons should always be based on a thorough knowledge of the relevant background. A good example is provided by the contrast between British and French students. In the UK, only 35 percent of students belong by birth to the service class; in France the relevant figure is 70 percent. Burrage, rather intrigued, seeks an explanation: CEOs in the UK, as opposed to their counterparts in Germany and France, rarely hold academic degrees. Further on in the book, he concludes the case study of France with a section on the Noblesse d'Etat which retains the quasi monopoly of high ranking positions both in the private and public sectors. Consequently, it can be viewed as a class backed by state power. However he disregards another very important point: in continental West European countries, about 40 percent of the cohort goes into tertiary education, as opposed to only 25 percent in the UK. This could be interpreted as being the result of socially more open red brick universities, but I doubt it. It could also be due to the lesser importance given to degrees in British society. The latter argument would not run in favour of a classless society in the UK even though it is clear that rank and file experience for future executives is more highly valued in London than in Frankfurt or Paris.

A key point in the book is the rather paradoxical view Burrage develops with respect to the working class. He argues that workers in England never formed a social class strongly segregated and opposed to the bourgeoisie as S. and B. Webb and many others have described. He insists on the continuity from yeomanry and journeymen clubs to the guilds and to the unions. The workers were never segregated because the middle and working classes have much in common, both having been organised through medieval corporate institutions, enjoying the privilege of self-regulation and, in some cases, royal privileges and the like. An illustrative chapter, *Re-examining the English Mystery*, relies on several French and US case studies to come to the conclusion: "the long standing power of voluntary cohesion and cooperation" as the key to the mystery. The largely autonomous organisations of two main

classes – workers and the middle class – prevented them from calling for state support or from imposing any kind of minute state control. Of course, in this insightful but one-sided sketch, it is not likely that we will find any information on the conditions of workers in the 18th and 19th centuries.

A working class emerged in the USSR after the revolution which, as everybody knows, was led by peasants and soldiers rather than workers. (The same applies to China.) Rapid industrialisation by itself would not have been sufficient to build up a class in all its dimensions, including prestige. In France the revolutionary spirit of the unions' Congrès de Reims together with state support prevented workers and their families from becoming a closed class. In the US, a working class was about to appear at the time of the New Deal when the Roosevelt Administration implemented several schemes in favour of the unions. However, after Harry Truman's re-election in 1948, the country's industrial relations policy changed triggering the decline of the unions.

Imperial Russia had five classes, and the Soviet Union only one. France is composed of five classes which are not exactly parallel to those of the former Russia. In the UK, intellectuals appeared in lieu of the self-governing professionals. The "cadre" class is a French singularity arising from state support of their union; the lesser bourgeoisie made up of provincial landowners and traditional services is over-represented in the Senate. Finally, General de Gaulle launched the basis of a ruling class made up of senior civil servants who become MPs or, sometimes, ministers or CEOs. Bourdieu refers to the *Noblesse d'État*. The United States never established any enduring national class formation partly due to the impact of immigration, high levels of job turnover, and geographic as well as social mobility, and partly due to liberal ideology. I should say that it is rather difficult to accept that, with some reason, he endorses the identification of the *Noblesse d'État* in France as a class while setting aside C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*.

Finally, his most significant point: classes appear to have been formed most effectively under the condition of a state power supporting the efforts of some parts of civil society aiming to organise themselves as classes. Guilds, unions and professions, as well as lords and the gentry, need state support.

It would appear that neither the forces of the civil society nor state power are sufficient in themselves to transform a set of social inequalities into classes. Left to themselves, market forces undermine and dissolve the class for the very reason that classes need rents while free competition fights against this. It is therefore not surprising that Burrage quotes

Sorensen: "A rent-free labour market would be one where simple class schemes are increasingly less applicable". Sharp class conflict results from rent-seeking behaviour.

Let us now consider the British case. From an historical perspective, the aristocracy emerges as the prototype with wealth, power, status and functions well preserved up to recent times. The exceptional power of the Westminster Parliament derives from and maintains the social importance of this wealthy and rather segregated group. Regardless of any internal divisions, the middle and working classes attained the status of classes largely because aristocracy was the prototype. The middle class was organised in comparative form. A class cannot be effectively considered apart from the class system.

How did the class system come to an end in Britain? The answer lies in Thatcher's reforms. Let us consider the four major aspects of this. The first is privatisation. The supportive environment that public corporations had provided for unions and professional associations disappeared. "Making professionals compete in quasi markets undermined their sense of being collectively responsible and encouraged everyone to think that were only equally isolated market actors." The destruction of the unions followed. The third major issue was represented by the systematic attacks on the professions as well as on self-employed private practitioners, who lost most of their power of self-regulation. Management consultants replaced professional bodies and, of course, the central power of the state was reinforced by the kind of *diminutio capitis* the professions suffered. The fourth and last aspect is the evolution of vocational training. State-controlled boards replaced apprenticeship by multiple crafts or unions. In former times, the barriers and social distance between middle and working class occupations coexisted with collegial and egalitarian intra-occupational and intra-class relationships that the Thatcher reforms were dedicated to destroying.

Finally, we have a very appealing conclusion. British society relied much less than the three others on family, church and school, which are the traditional pillars of social order. That argument is readily documented in so far the school is concerned. Burrage states, on the basis of evidence, that religious institutions have long been in decline and, finally, that "England has been a society where the authority of the parents and the ties with the extended family have long been weak". The class system and the social order it maintained explains why riots and violence were unusually rare despite the huge inequalities that subsisted until WWII.

Leaving aside the British case, let us turn back to the general thesis of the book. It would not be entirely correct to read Burrage as an

anti-Marxist. Burrage is mostly interested in social cohesion. One could say that static market forces are a solvent of class institutions. Classes are best formed when the state and civil society act in concert. Otherwise, either one or the other becomes a de facto ally of the class-destroying market forces. He considers classes as quiet but effective instruments of social order; their destruction launching British society into an unfamiliar experiment. It thereby derived a class system that is in some way a rent system that cannot coexist with today's aggressively competitive capitalism – a capitalism that succeeded the managerial system of the 1960s that John K. Galbraith so superbly described. Ironically enough, it could be said that Burrage supports Marxist opposition against capitalism.

Allow me to conclude with a French touch. This book suggests that the current consensus, which in support of modernisation and globalisation favours individual evaluation while being contemptuous of degrees and diplomas, contributes to destroying the social cohesion that arose after WWII due to a certain level of collective tacit agreement between the classes.

J A C Q U E S L A U T M A N