

(class)

## **CLASS, STATUS AND POWER**

[The following introduction is taken from the report to the E.S.R.C. written by Alan Macfarlane in 1983]

There is a great deal in the assembled documents concerning the various kinds of relations of inequality. A detailed analysis is possible of the distribution of ownership and wealth, of consumption patterns, linguistic usages, ways in which prestige and honour were gained and maintained. The historian has to work cautiously and indirectly since the documents do not speak of these matters directly and it is usually what is assumed and not said that is most important. Yet in their terms of address between individuals, in the seating patterns, in the patterns of intermarriage and in many other indices we gain some idea of the nature of inequality and watch how the principles and outcome change over time. We can also investigate the patterns of social mobility as individuals and families rise and decline over the centuries.

A major setting for many of these relationships of equality and inequality, alongside the important sphere of work and law, was in what we may broadly term 'leisure', although what is labour and what leisure is, of course, culturally defined. The English have, it seems, always taken their games, sport and drinking seriously, and consequently there is material for the study of informal relations in hunting and fishing, in the playing of games and gambling, and in the inns and alehouses which were so common in both Earls Colne and Kirkby Lonsdale. There are, for example, instances of games of tennis as early as the fifteenth, and of football as early as the sixteenth century. The enormous importance of public drinking is clear throughout the material and the inn and alehouse were obviously as important to the population as the Church or court room.

If we record our impressions specifically concerning class, we are faced with a strange contradiction in the material. England is often thought of as the most class-conscious of countries, and indeed in some ways it is. Inherited and acquired differences are very important now and they clearly were from the start of our period. The whole educational and social systems emphasize differences and people expend much energy in attempting to move up in the hierarchy. In this sense it was the most hierarchical of societies. Yet, in another sense, it would appear that it was a classless society. This was partly a function of the ease and frequency of social mobility. There was frequent inter-marriage between people at different levels. Though there is evidence of growing separation between a small village elite and the rest in both our parishes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the hierarchy remained curiously open. There was an absence of the almost caste-like distinctions between the estates or orders which we find in the adjacent continental countries of the ancien regime. Except at the very top and the very bottom, it is difficult to know to which 'class' people belonged in the past. There was no obvious three or four-fold division; there was no 'middle-class', the best one can talk about is the large group of the 'middling sort', who varied enormously. There is a noticeable absence in our period of any kind of 'class consciousness'. Of course, there were remarks that certain people were too rich, that they were above themselves. But the idea that there was a discrete group of oppressed and downtrodden persons, a 'proletariat' who stood in conscious opposition to another group, the 'capitalists', does not work in either of our parishes

It appears that there was hierarchy, but an open hierarchy, a meritocratic system of sorts. Wealth not blood was the great criterion of position, a situation where money and contract, not blood and status, ruled. Through luck and hard-work, or through bad fortune and sloth, a person could quickly move from the top to the bottom of the society. There were no discrete, enduring groups or orders. There was endless social movement and within one generation children of the same parents could be near the top and near the bottom of the social pyramid. Life was a never-ending game in which a person could at any moment lose most of what he had won. The insecurities of fortune's wheel fits very well with those religious and social insecurities which Weber and his followers have documented. This provided the social background for that acquisitive and competitive society which is reflected in the local documents.

If we turn from ownership of the means of production, or class, to status and status honour, there is the same contradiction. It is clear that we are dealing with a society where the difference between various estates are in theory very important. Through most of the period there were elaborate attempts to regulate the expressions of status - costumes, diet, deportment, sport. We are dealing with a society built on 'callings' and 'estates', on infinite gradations of that ascription of social honour about which Weber wrote. But unlike almost all other traditional societies, these ascriptions were not fixed and permanent. The gradations were so many and so subtle, and the convertibility of wealth into status so easy, that people appeared to have moved very rapidly up and down the ladder during their lives. The impermanence of particular positions appears to be linked to another curious feature, the absence of a bitterly enforced code of honour.

If we compare the situation in England (excluding for the moment the courtiers of the Crown) with that in the 'honour and shame' cultures documented by anthropologists for the Mediterranean, there is a curious lack of emphasis on 'respect' 'honour' and 'deference'. The constant competition for honour, with its constant ramifications in wounded pride, duelling, taunts, gossip, flaunting of male power, is missing. There are hints of this at the level of the higher gentry, but from the inhabitants of our parishes there is very little sign of it. This is certainly not a society held together by honour and respect. A related feature of this, the system of patrons and clients, of protection provided by the patron, and of respect and honour afforded to him by his client, is also, as we have earlier argued, largely absent. Although the villages we are examining appear to be impressed by wealth and by skill, they seem to be strangely unimpressed by political office.