

Britain: the class-ridden society



Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets. The rich and the poor.

(Benjamin Disraeli)

Sibyl, or The Two Nations

The twofold nature of British ruling classes

Aristocracy

The House of Lords and monarchy were abolished in 1649 and restored in 1660.

- Social class still has an official and legal definition: the distinction between commoners and peers
- A large part of the land, and therefore of wealth made from farming, still belongs to the landed gentry and is passed down from generation to generation.

Bourgeoisie

The growth of the manufacturing sector since approximately the seventeenth century allowed another class to rise and gain a prominent social role alongside the aristocracy: industrialists, merchants and bankers.

Evolutions in the second half of the twentieth century

1. Bridging the social divide

the Beveridge report (1942)

the National Health Service (NHS)

the benefits system

education: the tripartite system → the comprehensive system

reducing social inequalities

the “Keynesian /keinz-/ consensus”

2. The limits of social democracy

Comprehensive schools did not replace selective schools (grammar schools) but were created alongside them.

Working-class people retained a strong class identification (“us and them”).

3. Ending the Keynesian consensus

monetarism

neoclassical economics

the Chicago school of economics

Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek

- “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.” Margaret Thatcher, conservative United Kingdom Prime Minister, 1987

America: a social rubbish heap or a classless Eden?

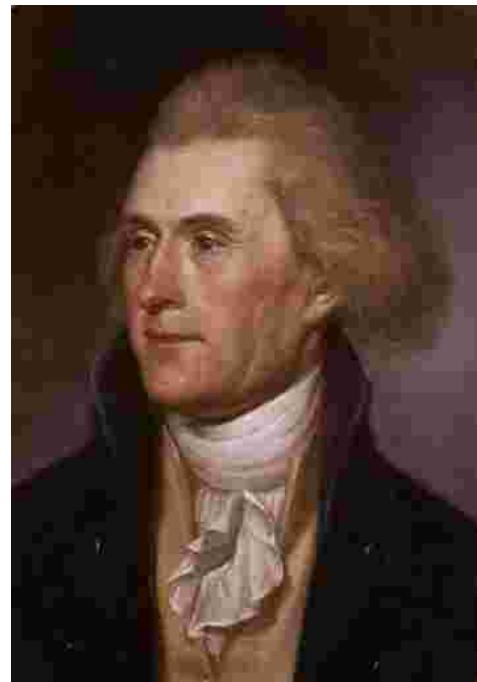
The English, then British, colonies in North America,
were founded with several aims.

One of these aims was to dispose of undesirable ‘idle’
and ‘unproductive’ people.

American ambivalence towards aristocracy

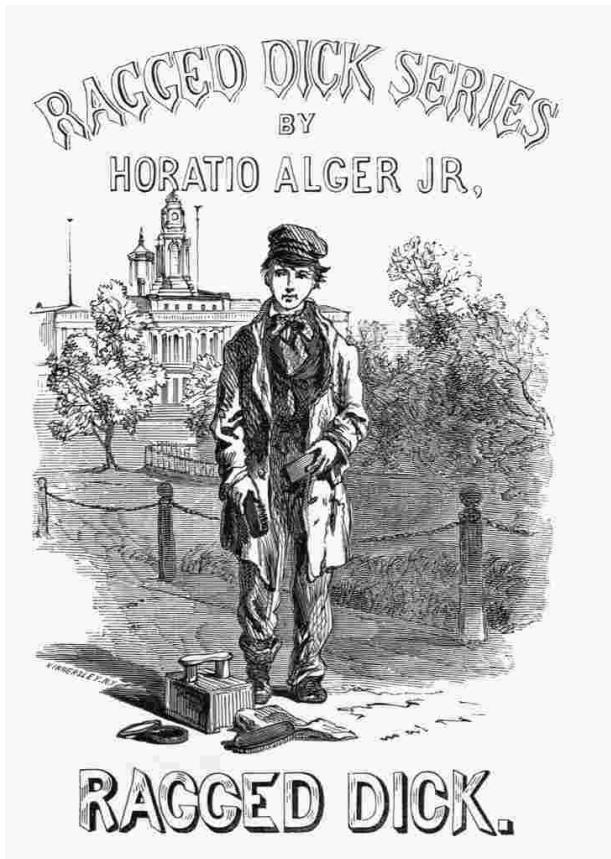
‘[...] I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. [...] There is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society.’

Thomas Jefferson, co-author of the American Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States, in a letter to John Adams, 28 October 1813



America has also been seen as an exceptional country contrasting from the monarchies and fixed aristocracies of the Old World by classlessness and social mobility.

Jeffersonian democracy, followed by Jacksonian democracy, emphasised the chances for common people available in America.



Nineteenth century American literature celebrated upward social mobility.

Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks

by Horatio Alger Jr, published 1867-1868

American classlessness is celebrated by Charles Murray in *Coming Apart* (2012), where it is encapsulated by a 1963 Gallup poll in which half respondents described themselves as working class and the other half as middle class.

The words people use to refer to social class:

Britain	
	upper class
middle class	upper middle class
	lower middle class
lower class	

United States	
	middle class
	working class

Social divides are mentioned nonetheless:

- educational: educated / undereducated
- occupational: white collar, professional / blue collar
- geographical: Eastern / Southern and Western
- cosmopolitan / rural, provincial

Nineteenth-century evolutionist theories on social class: ‘social Darwinism’

In the second half of the nineteenth century, some intellectuals transposed Darwinism to explain, and justify, inequalities:

Herbert Spencer

Progress: Its Law and Cause (1857)

The Social Organism (1860)

Spencer’s theories of social evolution were devised before the publication of Darwin’s biological theory of evolution. Spencer’s ideas on evolution were derived from Lamarck, not Darwin.

→ classical liberalism (*laissez-faire* economics)

Francis Galton

→ eugenics

Twentieth-century remedial policies in the United States

Ending racial discrimination

- the 1964 Civil Rights Act
- the 1965 Voting Rights Act
- affirmative action (1967 executive order)

/ *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023)

- the 1968 Civil Rights Act

Addressing economic inequalities

- Social Security: pensions for retired and disabled people
- Medicare: health insurance for people aged 65 and older + disabled people
 - Medicaid: means-tested health benefits
 - food stamps: means-tested benefits

Efforts to remedy educational inequalities

No Child Left Behind (2001-2015)

America's elite universities: aristocracy in all but name?

The highest-ranking American universities use descent (“legacy status”) as a criterion to select their students.

According to a study by Jessica M. Wang and Brian P. Yu (2017) 29% of first-year students at Harvard are children of alumni.

According to a study by Michael Hurwitz (2011) an applicant's chance of being admitted in a top-ranking university is higher by 45 percentage points if their parents are alumni.

In 2014, Johns Hopkins University discontinued legacy admissions, followed by a few other high-ranking institutions.

Four states have outlawed legacy admissions.

Contemporary criticism of inequality

‘[I]n our democracy, 1% of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation’s income ... In terms of wealth rather than income, the top 1% control 40% ... [as a result] the top 1% have the best houses, the best educations, the best doctors, and the best lifestyles, but there is one thing that money doesn’t seem to have bought: an understanding that their fate is bound up with how the other 99% live.’

Joseph Stiglitz, ‘Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%’, *Vanity Fair*,
May 2011



Occupy Wall Street (September-November 2011)

In 1989, UCLA School of Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw published her essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”.

In her wake, researchers in **intersectional studies** analyse how different social factors combine their effects: gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability...

