Conservatism and Class Difference in Twentieth-Century British Art

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> 'A 1000 mile long, 2 kilometer deep body of water even, is pushed against us from the Floridas, to make us mild.'[1]
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> François Jonquet to Gilbert & George: 'I can't understand how you can be conservative and at the same time avant-garde'.[2]

It is a commonplace that twentieth-century British politics were mild and compromising, untroubled by the extremes that wracked the other major European powers. Alone amongst them, Britain suffered no abrupt transformation of its politics by revolution, coup or invasion. While the components of its political compromise certainly changed, no major challenges from Right or Left found success, and for most of the period lacked any prospect of success. Another piece of received wisdom is that (variously) avant-garde and modernist art were regularly associated with radical, and indeed revolutionary, politics. Here, Britain again seems to be an exception: its vanguards and modern movements were generally politically muted affairs, and those that took up radical political positions in art often did so against modernism and avant-gardism. There was no British equivalent of French Surrealism, with its attempts to engage with the Communist Party, for example, or of the entire model of avant-garde activity that emulated the vanguard party (and Breton's attempt to push the British Surrealists into an alliance with Trotskyism was met with pragmatic silence).[3] Nor was there an equivalent of Hannes Meyer's Bauhaus programme, let alone of anti-aesthetic Soviet Constructivism (it was rather the prettified, liberal version of that movement, stemming from Gabo and Pevsner, that was embraced in Britain). Equally, it is difficult to find Continental figures in the visual arts who resisted modernism with as much prominence and popular success as Stanley Spencer, David Hockney or Gilbert & George.

My subject here will be the middle class in British art, its depictions of itself and others in class terms, and how those factors changed as the fortunes and composition of the classes changed. The focus on class difference provides a particular perspective on British art but necessarily means playing down work that had definite political orientation although it did not directly represent class—including various forms of abstraction and Conceptualism. It also provides a particular focus on class politics that tends to underplay the rapidly changing factors of race, gender and sexual preference. I can only say that readers should bear these

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[1] Wyndham Lewis, 'Manifesto', *Blast*, no. 1, 1914, p. 11.
[2] François Jonquet, *Gilbert & George: Intimate Conversations with François Jonquet*, Phaidon, London 2004, p. 314.
[3] See Michael Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, Ashgate, Aldershot 1999, pp. 156-7.

deficiencies in mind, and I hope that the benefits of this particular focus warrant them: after all, following a great deal of salutary restorative work since the postmodern turn, class is once more (as it was before the development of Marxism) the most neglected of these elements. Following the logic of its subject matter, this piece is not a survey; there will be an uneven attention, too, on those periods where class conflict, political dissent and controversy was most in evidence—particularly the period prior to 1914, the 1930s and the 1970s onwards.

The essay's scope is set by two moments, both political and artistic, which coincide: politically, between the 'strange death of liberal England' just before the First World War, that produced long periods of Conservative dominance in the interwar and postwar periods, and the 'strange death of Tory England' in the 1990s precipitated under the Major regime.[4] Artistically, these moments correspond to the rise of the first radical and self-conscious avant-gardes in British art, of contrasting political inflections—Bloomsbury and Vorticism; and the apparently definitive surrender of avant-garde functions (if not the ghost of its form) in the conservative populism of 'young British art'.

Between these two moments, class as expressed in British art has been governed by the various cycles that effected social life as a whole—economic, political and technological. The regular pattern of boom and bust that characterised much of this period produced in art many similar, repeated characteristics of reaction that echoed across the decades. Recessions, including those in the 1930s and 1990s, focused art-world attention on British matters, and both were accompanied by widespread complaints about the indignities undergone by artists in adapting to their straightened times. In the 1930s Slump, many railed against the overt commercialisation of art, its failing quality, and about artists more concerned with marketing than the inherent qualities of their art.[5] These writings resonate with judgements made about 'young British art' in the 1990s. The prolonged periods of Tory rule, punctuated by Labour administrations that regularly disappointed their radical supporters, gave rise to similar patterns. The rise and assimilation of various technologies of visual cultural production and reproduction, notably photography, cinema, television, video and the Internet, brought about reactions of embrace and resistance, connected with the economic and political cycles. The slow adoption of new technologies in the British art world, particularly when compared to Germany and the US—photography being a notorious case—is linked to a widespread middle-class suspicion of industry and its products.[6]

Another way to characterise this period is to say that it is a time of middle-class dominance of politics, marked by the reduction of the Lords' powers in 1910 and expressed in the long periods of Tory government. The middle class steadily increased in numbers throughout the period, especially between 1920 and 1950, and in the process became increasingly technical

[4] George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, Serif, London 1996, first published in 1936; Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *The Strange Death of Tory England*, Penguin, London 2005.

[5] For the Slump, see Andrew Stephenson, '"Strategies of Situation": British Modernism and the Slump c. 1929-1934, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1991), p. 44; for 'young British art', see Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, Verso, London 2006.

[6] On the issue of the slow and uneven adoption of photography by museums in Britain, see Alexandra Moschovi, *Photo-phobia and Photo-philia: the Neglect and Accommodation of Photography in British Art Institutions in the Postmodern Era*, PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, London 2004.

and scientific in character.[7] More specifically, it was on the growth of a salaried professional class that this renewed Toryism was founded, a class that had risen from insignificance in the middle of the nineteenth century to dominate the middle class by 1914. For Harold Perkin, that rise was based on 'human capital' created by public school and university education, and it was fuelled by the needs of the expanding state and Empire, by the need to administrate large cities and cater to the intellectual needs of a national population increasingly aware of itself as a politically constituted body.[8] The period also saw the steady decline of organised religion, and with it the removal of one of the great divides in the middle class as the importance of the gulf between the Church of England and non-conformists fell away.[9] Near the beginning of our period was also the point—in 1918—when Britain became what we would now recognise as a functioning democracy, as the franchise was extended from male house-holders to all males over 21 and all women over 30 (women were to gain equality in this ten years later). The electorate was tripled in size, and working-class power first found full parliamentary expression, and so this is also the period of variable pressure from organised working-class power over middle-class hegemony. That pressure and the resulting effects on the depiction of class difference will be examined here. Again, Britain is exceptional: while in the interwar period, working-class power was successfully shut out of mainstream politics by diverse methods in France, Germany and Italy, in Britain it achieved a degree of integration.
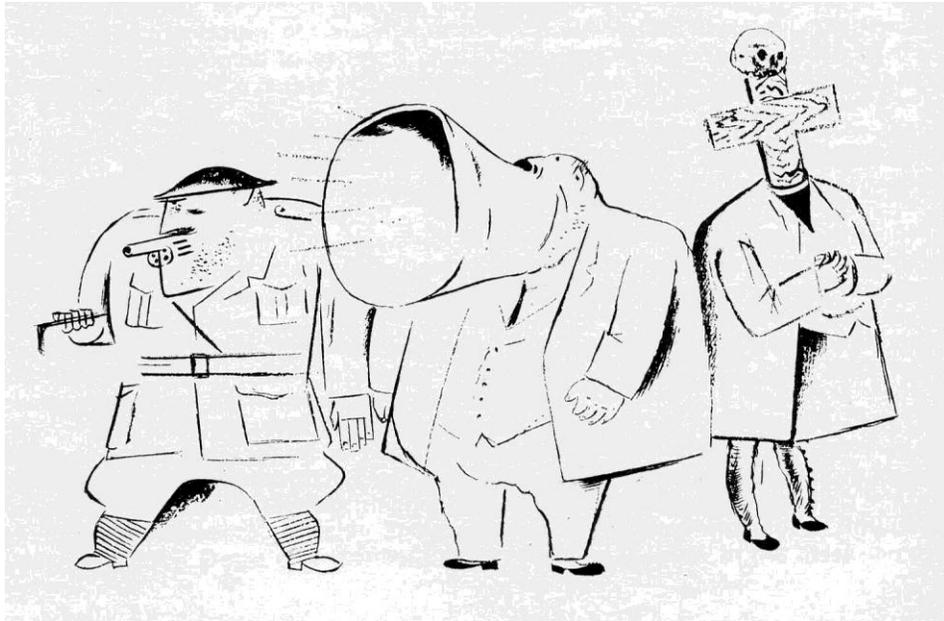
James Boswell, *Left Review*, 1935

Another important feature in Britain's stability was that in the interwar period, the working class remained split in political allegiance, a large section of it voting Tory (again, a factor

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[7] Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 46.
[8] The central account here is Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, Routledge, London 2002. We can, I think, use the very valuable empirical work in this account without subscribing to the view (unevenly held to) that the professional class overwrites rather than intersects existing class stratification.
[9] McKibbin, pp. 91f.

unique in Europe).[10] Until the late 1970s, its elites of all political persuasions settled on favouring social calm over headlong modernisation and growth. This policy was deeply reflected in the middle-class culture of much of this period (so compellingly described by Ross McKibbin): given the social stresses engendered by increasing mobility, the response was the development of a conversational culture that valued humour and politeness, and abjured divisive talk about religion and politics (and with it large tracts of intellectual debate tout court).[11] Walter Sickert, writing of his time in France where fellow painters had discussed with as much clarity as they could muster the defects of his painting, noted with exasperation the contrast with London where friends were judged according to whether they were 'nice about' one's work.[12]

There were artists who reacted violently against the culture of conciliation and its mores, but they were exceptions; and while many artists lived bohemian existences of which the middle class hardly approved, they internalised many of its values. This essay will attempt to lay out the middle ground of political, social and artistic conservatism, and will juxtapose it with a few of the exceptions, from Right and Left, usually isolated figures, who attempted to opposed it. Much of the radical opposition was oriented romantically to the past rather than the future, to various forms of prelapsarian and often rural community. For Peter Fuller (whose moralistic writing had a sway in the 1980s which from this historical distance is difficult to imagine) such conservatism was the strength and very identity of British culture: 'real achievement in British art has, again and again, been bound up with a certain fidelity to a prior, conservative tradition and with informed refusals, reticences, and reluctances in the face of the modern world.'[13]

Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn's historical and theoretical accounts have been among the most influential attempts to explain British mildness in politics, and lacklustre economic performance following the middle of the nineteenth century. They point to the incomplete character of the bourgeois revolution in Britain that left royalty and aristocracy in place.[14] Britain developed a capitalist class but it was less than fully bourgeois, with its large admixture of aristocracy and gentry. Moreover, successful bourgeois entrepreneurs absorbed aristocratic ideals, and pursued various means to ennoblement. Another way of putting this is to say that only in Britain was industrialisation an indigenous process (rather than imported in an already developed form), and as such it was necessarily more closely tailored to existing social structures.[15] The ideals of the ruling elite remained rooted in aristocratic culture and the rural idyll. Martin Wiener, in his analysis of English resistance to industry and commerce, founded on the work of Anderson and Nairn, points to (among many

[10] McKibbin, pp. 530-1.

[11] McKibbin, pp. 96-8. McKibbin's remarkable account of class in Britain is central to my account here.

[12] Sickert, 'Walter Bayes', preface to an 'Exhibition of Paintings by Walter Bayes', Leicester Galleries, 1918; in Walter Sickert, *The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Anna Gruetzner Robins, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 422.

[13] Peter Fuller, 'British Art in the Twentieth Century: Royal Academy', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 129, no. 1009 (April 1987), p. 263.

[14] See Perry Anderson, *English Questions*, Verso, London 1992, particularly the chapter 'Origins of the Present Crisis' originally published in 1964; Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, New Left Books, London 1977; various critiques of this view have been published, notably E.P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', *The Socialist Register*, 1965, pp. 311-62. Anderson replied in *Arguments Within English Marxism*, Verso, London 1980.

[15] Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, second edition, 2004, p. 7.

symptoms) the rural location of the most prestigious public schools, the long-held-to freedom of their curricula from any taint of science or practical utility, and their aspiration to prepare for the world not industrialists but soldiers, politicians and civil servants—the people needed to run the Empire.[16]

Recent accounts of British modernism have tended to claim either that it was not as timid as the standard histories (particularly that of Charles Harrison) suggested, or that to reduce the history of British art to modernism is to lose sight of its varied riches and particular character.[17] Both positions, while valuable in themselves, lose sight of the signal fact that British modernism was far less radical than that of France, Germany or Russia—a matter that is inextricably connected to politics, and demands explanation. Perry Anderson describes the parameters that sustained modernism in terms of the following tensions within which it operated: semi-aristocratic ruling orders, and with them a still current classical tradition to be rebelled against; semi-industrialised economies, against which new technologies stand out as genuinely novel, offering unexpected and unknown opportunities; and semi-emergent and insurgent labour movements, which could similarly be the repository of ideal political visions.[18]

Wyndham Lewis, *Ezra Pound*, 1939

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[16] Wiener, pp. 20-1.
[17] The influential account reacted against here is Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism, 1900-1939*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1994. For an example of the former, see David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art, 1914-30*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1997; for the latter, much of the work of Peter Fuller provides an anti-modernist history of English art. In particular, see Peter Fuller, *Seeing Through Berger*, The Claridge Press, London 1988.
[18] Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', *New Left Review*, no. 144, March-April 1984, pp. 104-5.

If we think of the classic case of France, it is apparent that all were powerfully in place—as Anderson points out, the modernism of Proust takes its stand against a still poignantly felt classical culture; France's industry is highly concentrated in small points against an ancient agrarian backdrop; labour is unpredictably rebellious and from the 1920s sustains a large Communist Party. Using these parameters to think about the relative weakness of British modernism produces a strikingly different picture. While the semi-aristocratic ruling orders are still strong (and they sustain the classically informed modernism of Eliot and Pound), the other factors are weaker. As the oldest industrial nation, Britain was highly familiar with the benefits and costs of industrialisation, and many of its politicians sought to rein them in. This was the basis on which Wyndham Lewis mocked the Italian Futurists, open-mouthed at their newly mechanical world ('Elephants are VERY BIG. Motor cars go quickly').[19] The British labour movement following the First World War was highly unionised, and was (generally) pragmatic and materialist in its aims. Naturally, then, the romance of the machine was less strongly felt than in Germany, France or Italy, as was the plausibility of looking to the working class to lead a fundamental revolt against capitalist society and culture.

More than that, the old order persisted and modernised itself. As McKibbin puts it, the monarchy more than survived: borne by radio and television, it strengthened its hold on the public imagination, becoming more ceremonial, glamorous and at the same time domestic.[20] In the public mind, the monarchy's role in both World Wars sealed it to the fate of the nation as a whole. Monarchs shared the aims of moderate conservatism, doing nothing in word or deed to alienate the Labour movement.[21] Up until 1939, an aristocratic world of 'Society' brought together the worlds of fashion, learning, politics, sport and the arts in a mix that was not found in continental Europe.[22] That world legitimated itself in the public eye, through the constant attention of the mass media, by its glamour, veneer of modernity and Americanisation, though it remained deeply conservative in outlook.[23] After the Second World War, much of that public role devolved upon the Royal Family alone.[24] Aristocratic culture, then, survived a the price of steeping its traditions in the media world where they were radically transformed.

Anti-industrial and anti-entrepreneurial attitudes stimulated by the industrialisation of the country increased in strength during the relative downturn in Britain's economic fortunes in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[25] Stanley Baldwin's claim in 1926, of one of the world's most urbanised nations, that 'England is the country and the country is England' was, says Wiener, already a cliché, and the general view of the English character was that its innate conservatism had tamed 'the dangerous engines of progress' unleashed by industrialisation.[26] Indeed, Baldwin saw his priority not as wealth creation or reducing

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[19] Lewis, 'Long Live the Vortex!', *Blast*, no. 1, 1914, p. 8.
[20] McKibbin, p. 7.
[21] McKibbin, p. 13.
[22] McKibbin, p. 23, 26.
[23] McKibbin, p. 33.
[24] McKibbin, p. 42.
[25] Wiener, pp. 43-4. The debate about the character and extent of that decline is summarised in Nicholas Crafts, 'Long-run Growth', in Roderick Floud/ Paul Johnson, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain: Volume III: Structural Change and Growth, 1939-2000*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 11-17, concluding that the economy did not fail, and that US overtaking of the UK economy could not have been prevented.
[26] Wiener, pp. 6, 100.

unemployment but as the protection of British institutions from extremism.[27] In this aim, he was successful—the Labour Party was absorbed into mainstream politics and class war was averted.[28] His regime also saw the beginning of peacetime state management of the economy, in which unrestrained competition was opposed by the encouragement of cartels and price-fixing, to the same ends of social calm.[29]

Wiener argues that the increasing professionalisation of the middle class, relying on their regular salaries and predominantly providing services, distanced them from the mindset of the industrial capitalist.[30] It was not that all or even many artists, and certainly not those of the avant garde, were straightforwardly middle class in these respects—indeed, with few exceptions, their life experiences were quite different. Far from being salaried and expecting slow and predictable advancement, their income was irregular and precarious. Far from conforming to middle-class moral expectations, many led a bohemian existence garnished with casual sexual encounters—and this often got them into trouble at just the points where their lives intersected middle-class convention. John Skeaping, in his charming if typical memoirs, recounts being ostracised by his parents following the break-up of his marriage to Barbara Hepworth.[31] Nevertheless, artists' origins and upbringing were generally middle class through most of this period (and could hardly be otherwise, given the systematically poor economic prospects of artists), and they generally served the middle class.[32] In that sense, there is a variable relation across the period between artists and that class, which can be tracked in part through an analysis of class difference in their work.

As Barnaby Wright has argued, there was an unstable aspect to artists' attitudes to middle-class professionalism. Insofar as they wished to portray their activities as transcendent or redemptive, the idea that they constituted a profession was harmful. Yet, they also yearned for some protection from full exposure to market forces, and for that the exclusive status of the profession was useful.[33] It was pursued first of all through specific curricula in art training (initially at the Slade) and in the publication of art criticism in dedicated art journals.[34] In these terms, even Bloomsbury's horror of the professional—and praise of the amateur, above all of Cézanne—was ambivalent, founded on the offer to the public of an exclusive, quasi-professional service: the provision of unalloyed aesthetic feeling.[35]

Raymond Williams' analysis of Bloomsbury as a progressive 'fraction' of the professional middle class does much to explain its prominent place in the British art world in the early twentieth century. Its composition, mostly Cambridge-educated, was that of the rising

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[27] Wiener, p. 101; citing Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War*, Cape, London 1975, p. 27.
[28] T.O. Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: History of the United Kingdom 1906-2001*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 175.
[29] Crafts in Floud/ Johnson, p. 18.
[30] Wiener, p. 15.
[31] John Skeaping, *Drawn from Life: An Autobiography*, Collins, London 1977, pp. 96-7.
[32] On the insecurities of the profession of artist, see Hans Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, Amsterdam University Press, Ambsterdam 2002.
[33] Barnaby Wright, *Modern Art and the Professionalisation of Culture: The Development of Modern Painting in England at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2004, pp. 17, 194-6.
[34] Wright, p. 29. Though, as we shall see below, there are doubts about how specialist this criticism was in language and outlook.
[35] Wright, p. 28.

professional class, and many of the group had family links with colonial administrators.[36] Its members' stress on personal clarity and candour, and on rational self-realisation, was directed against the starchier formal manners and vulgar instrumental concerns of their elders.[37] Its relation to the working class was one of clear separation, along with concerted charitable efforts to improve their lot.[38] Fry believed that class difference brought about a good deal of snobbish pretence in art appreciation, and that a classless society might encourage a more rational approach to art.[39] But that was far in the future: those courting Bloomsbury's approval could be denied full entry on grounds of class: Janet Woolf has tracked Mark Gertler's social discomfort in Bloomsbury circles, and equally their distaste of him.[40]

If there was no unified Bloomsbury outlook that cut across its various activities, this was because it was against such unifying schemes in principle, for they interfered with the sovereign development of the individual.[41] Of their extensive charitable and activist efforts, and of Keynes' theories of state economic management, Williams comments:

> … the governing object of all the public interventions is to secure this kind of autonomy, by finding ways of diminishing pressures and conflicts, and of avoiding disasters. The social conscience is, in the end, to protect the private consciousness.[42]

In this, their aim was at one with Baldwin's, and it helped ensure Bloomsbury's long dominance of British art. Furthermore, part of what artists sold (increasingly to the professional middle class) was the very image of subjective autonomy, and of spiritual transcendence—the image finally of anti-professionalism.

Yet economic circumstances could force a more overt professionalisation on artists, as the Slump did, taking them into commercial propaganda for companies such as Cadbury and Shell, and into interior design.[43] It led artists such as Paul Nash to rethink artistic competence in such a way as to encourage both state and business patronage.[44] Later it would move them to demand from the state various assurances for their support, through teaching, grants and other measures.

The immediate pre-war period has a number of features that mark it out from the long period of conservative pacification that followed: as George Dangerfield famously argued (from the standpoint of the 1930s, as another war loomed), there had emerged a number of serious perceived threats to democracy—a Tory army rebellion plotted over the imposition of Irish home rule, the protests of the suffragettes who took to widespread arson as well as

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[36] Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, Verso, London 1980, pp. 159-60.
[37] Williams, pp. 152-3.
[38] Williams, p. 155.
[39] See Judith Collins, 'Roger Fry's Social Vision of Art', in Christopher Green, ed., *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art*, Courtauld Gallery/ Merrell Holberton Publishers, London 2000, p. pp. 76-8.
[40] Janet Woolf, 'The Failure of a Hard Sponge: Class, Ethnicity and the Art of Mark Gertler', *New Formations*, no. 28, Spring 1996, pp. 57-60.
[41] Williams, pp. 164-5.
[42] Williams, p. 167.
[43] Stephenson, p. 41.
[44] Stephenson, p. 42, citing Nash, 'The Artist and the Community', *The Listener*, 20 January 1932, p. 100.

their better-known window-breaking and hunger-strikes, and above all of a unionised working class becoming aware of their power and, at least in some aspects influenced by Syndicalism, which saw ever-growing strike action as a means to effect a revolutionary transformation of society.[45] The 'Triple Alliance' of railway workers, miners and transport workers threatened severe disruption, and in the summer of 1914 delivered it. The general opinion in Europe was that Britain was in swift decline.[46] Furthermore, while the upper- and middle-class memories of that period are gilded, and that fondness reflects their genuine prosperity at that time, their increasing wealth was built on the declining income of the working class, and fuelled the prospect of serious strife.

Further, since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the nation had undergone a rapid and intense modernisation, which (as Lisa Tickner notes) involved much technological change, increasing rationalisation, secularisation and fast imperial expansion. Typewriters, telephones, gramophones, electric lighting, motor vehicles, tube trains, the telegraph and even aeroplanes and airships were transforming everyday life.[47] Also slowly emerging at this time was a national awareness of the social state of the nation that went beyond statistics, and was expressed first in popular accounts of, say, slum life (read by slum dwellers, among others), and also in cheap newspapers, and then through the illustrated magazines in photographs.[48]

In reaction to such disorienting changes and social threats, many looked back longingly to a pre-industrial era. Among them were, of course, two of the most influential commentators on art: John Ruskin and William Morris. Ruskin, in recommending Britain's imperial leadership, was struck by the contrast between the grandeur of that role and the environment of the homeland itself: 'The England who is to be mistress of half the earth, cannot remain herself a heap of cinders, trampled by contending and miserable crowds…' but must become happy, secluded and pure.[49] (In this passage, Ruskin remained wholly innocent of the notion that the profits of Empire helped fund the very domestic industrial development that he deplored, as well as manufacturing the necessary instruments of subjection to be used against populations near and far.) He explicitly recommended that industry be civilised by the ideals of the professions, using the clergy as his example.[50]

Ruskin was convinced that every failure in art was an ethical one, whether of an individual or a nation, and his characterisation of the British was of a people governed by a senseless, dissolute and merciless quest for diversion: 'How literally that word Dis-Ease, the Negation and impossibility of Ease, expresses the entire moral state of our English industry and its Amusements.'[51] And indeed it was Ease that remained the ideal of the English gentleman, and the provision of something like it the on a larger scale the preoccupation of governments.

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[45] Dangerfield, passim. On Syndicalism, see especially pp. 190-1.
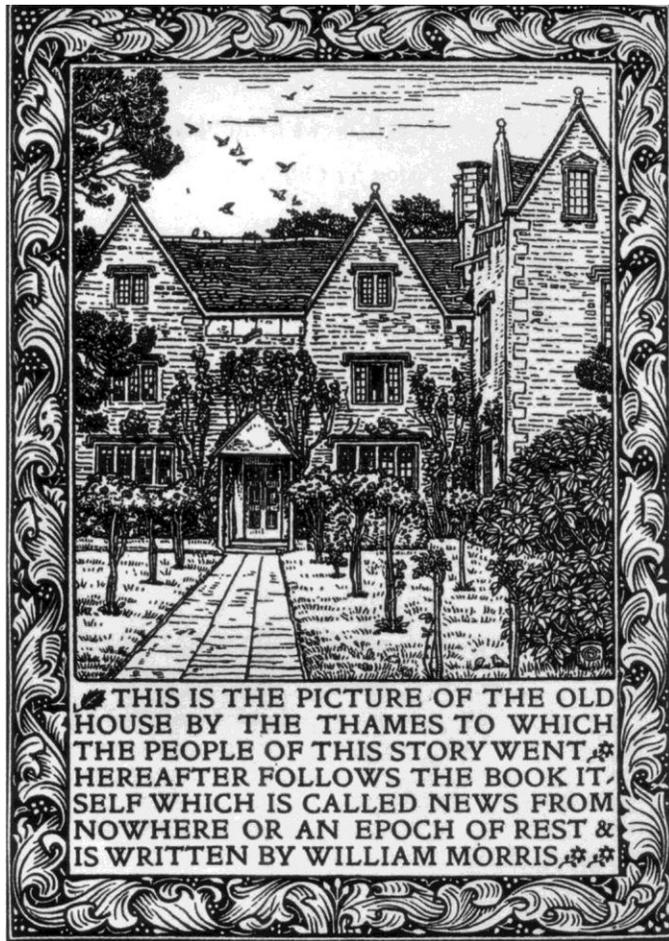[46] Dangerfield, p. 294.
[47] Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, p. 190.
[48] Dangerfield cites Charles Booth's *Life and Labour in London* (1889) B. Seebohm Rowntree's *Poverty* (1901), and Mona Wilson and E.G. Hawarth's *West Ham* (1907) as works read by slum-dwellers. See p. 212.
[49] John Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*. 'Lecture I: Inaugural', February 8th 1870; in *Works*, vol. xx, p. 43.
[50] See Wiener, p. 38; citing Ruskin, *Works*, vol. 17, p. 16.
[51] Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865); *Works*, vol. xviii, p. 97.

THIS IS THE PICTURE OF THE OLD HOUSE BY THE THAMES TO WHICH THE PEOPLE OF THIS STORY WENT. HEREAFTER FOLLOWS THE BOOK IT. SELF WHICH IS CALLED NEWS FROM NOWHERE OR AN EPOCH OF REST & IS WRITTEN BY WILLIAM MORRIS.

Morris looked back to a faux-medieval craft ideal, and with similar intent. As Wiener points out in his analysis of the appeal and success of such positions, the subtitle to *News from Nowhere* was *An Epoch of Rest*.[52] There are good Marxist reasons for romanticism, since looking back to an era when the division of labour was less sharply enforced may also be a way of looking forward to a time beyond capitalism. In Walter Benjamin's Arcades project, just such a model is found, with a rehabilitation of ideal features of the past in the light of an imminent modernist future.[53] In Morris, the ideal is of an autonomous creative labour in which all workers (and all will be workers) enjoy good living conditions, education and leisure time: 'what these three claims really mean is refinement of life for all; what is called the life of a gentleman for all…'[54] While Morris speculated in detail about the causes that would lead to capitalism's destruction, and foresaw a bloody reckoning between the classes, it was less clear how his particular vision of utopia would emerge from those struggles.[55]

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[52] Wiener, p. 59; William Morris, *News from Nowhere, or An Epoch of Rest*, Reeves & Turner, London 1894.

[53] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1999.

[54] Morris, 'Art and Labour' (1884) in Eugene D. Lemire, ed., *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1969, p. 115.

[55] For an analysis of Morris' account of the path to communism, and its unique place in Marxist thinking, see Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, Verso, London 1980, ch. 7

That deficiency, and the extreme character of Morris's vision, which sanctioned the extinction of every trace of modernity, allowed one sympathetic reviewer of *News from Nowhere* to state: 'we are not bound to consider *News from Nowhere* as a socialist guide book: let us consider it as a vision of the Promised Land'.[56] As Anderson argues, it was socialism's lack of political power in Britain at this time that encouraged radicals to speculate on improbable futures.[57]

Both Ruskin and Morris were of course complex and voluminous writers, whose views changed over their long careers; but what was most regularly taken from both was their ideal visions of quiet rural ease, and a matching aestheticism, which played to the establishment of deep English myths. That baleful influence was durable over Right and Left. When Peter Fuller and Toni del Renzio traded blows in an unintentionally risible battle over the true character of English art following the Hayward Annual in 1988, among the central bones of contention was the legacy of Ruskin—who for Fuller was the greatest exponent of the English Romantic aesthetic, and the cosh with which to put paid to weak and rootless English modernism.[58] In the mid 1980s, faced with the catastrophic effects of Thatcher's monetarist policies in deepening the recession, the Islington Communist Party distributed flyers with the remarkable slogan: 'William Morris was a Communist. Why not you?', an appeal unlikely to play persuasively in the borough's council estates.

In various forms, this romantic, anti-modernist attitude was prevalent through much of the period. Dangerfield expressed his amazement at the archaic character of the commercially successful 'Georgian Poetry' of the pre-war period: that these modern, young poets, among them Rupert Brooke, took refuge from the threatening twentieth century in the eternal English countryside,[59] and attached themselves to a socialism of 'a William Morris sort.'[60] There were painterly equivalents, particularly Augustus John, avant-garde in expressive style but conventionally transferring his bohemianism to the pastures, as he played at being a gypsy, travelling in a horse-drawn caravan. These recreational compensations were no accident: as Tickner points out, such caravanning became popular just as transport was becoming motorised.[61] A connected point is made by Raymond Williams in his acute remark that there was an inverse proportion between the importance of the rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas.[62] In contrast with the US and Continental Europe, the English rural economy was inessential to the needs of the elite and had been allowed to wane. Depopulated, relatively free of threatening class antagonisms, it was a blank canvas on which the fantasies of urbanites could be projected.[63] This fascination with an imagined ancient country life spread through the middle class after 1914. As Wiener puts it:

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[56] Lionel Johnson, review in *Academy*, no. xxxix, 23 May 891, pp. 483-4; reprinted in Peter Faulkner, ed., *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1973, p. 340.

[57] Anderson, *Arguments*, p. 171.

[58] Peter Fuller, *Seeing Through Berger*, The Claridge Press, London 1988, pp. 101-42.

[59] Dangerfield, p. 345.

[60] Wiener, p. 62.

[61] Tickner, p. 77.

[62] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Chatto & Windus, London 1973; cited in Wiener, p. 48.

[63] See Wiener, pp. 48-9.

Rarely had a triumphant class come into its own inheritance with more diffidence, more readiness to adopt as its own the values of the class it replaced.[64]

In these circumstances of a dominant rural ideal, artists' portrayal of the urban working class tended to views of their exotic and modern entertainments, accompanied by more intimate domestic scenes that played up the major and minor evils of impoverished city life.

Sickert, to take one example, was more interested in the atmosphere, light and patina of working-class or petit-bourgeois existence than in individuation; his is a psychology of pose, not facial expression; of quiet boredom and implied anguish, or the aftermath of violence. The rationale for dealing with working-class subject matter was the impulse to realist story-telling, from which no subject should be ruled out, and it is true that Sickert's handling of paint and subject is similar when he depicts other social classes. In trying to describe the ideal practice of painting, Sickert writes of a fictional subject of a man of 'good breeding' standing and chatting in an English front room at tea time, from which he aspires to find not an individual subject but a combination of mood, pose and lighting that produce 'the quintessential embodiment of life', an 'Everyman'. And of these elements, they are 'things of the spirit, phantom sensations built of dust and sunbeams, of personal sympathy and a light play of mood…'[65]

Yet, in works such at *Off to the Pub*, class is central. The male model for *Off to the Pub* was a petty criminal called Hubby who worked for a time as Sickert's model and dogsbody.[66] The interest here is in bringing an alien world of squalor, tedium and tension before a middle-class audience for painting. Artists waste their time dressing up working-class models as ladies and posing them in the studio, wrote Sickert; rather let them 'climb the first dirty little staircase in the first shabby little house' and find the model's true significance in her kitchen or, better, her bedroom.[67] As Shone points out, Sickert's subjects are the melodramas of the music hall.[68] Only naively can they be seen as depictions of real life; rather they are pre-consumed fictionalised scenes transposed into paint for the delectation of a middle-class public (just as the demotic subjects of the young British artists, of whom Shone has written sympathetically, were drawn from television, movies and pop music).[69] Shone adds: 'Nothing we know of Sickert's character and views could lead us to suppose that he was motivated by a tender social conscience.'[70]

[64] Wiener, p. 72.
[65] Sickert, 'A Stone Ginger', *The New Age*, 19 March 1914; in *Writings*, p. 344.
[66] Wendy Baron and Richard Shone, eds., *Sickert Paintings*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 1993, p. 216.
[67] Sickert, 'The Study of Drawing, *The New Age*, 16 June 1910; in *Writings*, p. 247.
[68] Richard Shone, 'Walter Sickert, the Dispassionate Observer', in Wendy Baron and Richard Shone, eds., *Sickert Paintings*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 1993, p. 7.
[69] Among a number of contributions, Shone wrote an essay in an exhibition Damien Hirst curated: Serpentine Gallery, *Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away...*, London 1994, and contributed to the Sensation catalogue: 'From "Freeze" to *House*: 1988-94', in Royal Academy of Arts, *Sensation*, London 1997, pp. 12-24.
[70] Shone, *Sickert*, p. 8.

Walter Sickert, *Off to the Pub*, c. 1911

In the fervid, conflictual atmosphere of Spring 1914, Sickert wrote:

> The artist can be no Liberal, no Socialist. He knows with Santayama [sic] that the Liberal ideal, 'The greatest happiness of the greatest number' means 'the greatest laziness of the lowest possible population'.

Art's moral justification is to be found in setting an example of 'contented industry'.[71] Such sentiments of indifference to social hierarchy were and are found regularly among artists and in the art world, and would be relayed decades later by Francis Bacon, for example.[72]

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[71] Sickert, 'On Swiftness', *The New Age*, 26 March 1914; in *Writings*, p. 346. Sickert means George Santayana, of course.

[72] Bacon said that he viewed social injustice as part of the 'texture of life' and that the suffering it caused was what made great art. See 'Interview 4', in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames and Hudson, London 1975, pp. 125.
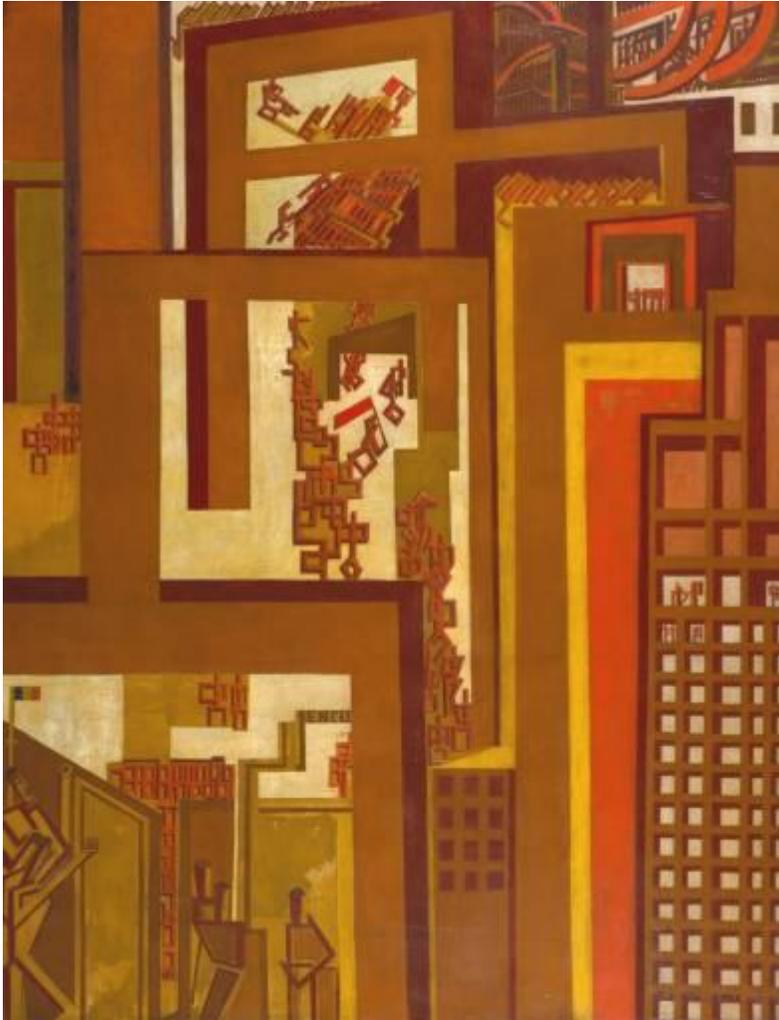
Wyndham Lewis, *The Crowd*, exh. 1915

At this point, in the period just before the outbreak of war, Lewis found his brief success, as avant-garde art became momentarily fashionable, and the artist was courted by aristocratic society. As Tickner remarks, Futurism and its English variant brokered relations between avant-garde art and the aristocracy by transforming the artist into 'a sportsman-adventurer in the grip of technophiliac lust…'[73] Also (as Tickner further notes) this consumerism was fed by mingling the vulgar with the elite, mixing as Lewis put it gold with flint or glass, by loading the motifs of working-class entertainment into the vehicles of fine art.[74] Both Lewis' painting and his manifesto statements in *Blast* foster contradiction, and play with the rhetoric of avant-garde excess, in a parody of Marinetti: 'Curse abysmal, inexcusable middle-class (also Aristocracy and Proletariat).'[75] So Vorticism promised to fight on both sides at once.

It was at this point, too, that Lewis painted *The Crowd*, the only large-scale Vorticist painting by him to survive, and one plainly meant as a manifesto piece. Lewis' view of the working class (and of 'primitives' generally) was deeply and self-consciously ambivalent. They were

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[73] Tickner, p. 82.
[74] Tickner, p. 95; Lewis, 'The Exploitation of Vulgarity', *Blast*, no. 1, 1914, p. 145.
[75] *Blast*, no. 1, 20th June 1914, p. 18.

the prey of mechanical instincts, and their apparently free lives are spectacles which are 'as complete as a problem of Euclid'.[76] Lewis criticised the Futurist romanticisation of the rioting crowd, and was always concerned with the danger of demhumanisation, domination by mechanical instinct, the loss of individuality and with it creativity, on both a personal and a collective level. Paul Edwards points out that *The Crowd* is a riposte to Luigi Russolo's *The Revolt* (1911) in which red masses borne along by fiery diagonals break into the modern city.[77] In *The Crowd* the tiny dynamic elements are constrained by the severe city grid, and the flag-bearing revolutionaries, components of the grid and in places indistinguishable from it, are merely products of the system that they aspire to oppose.[78] Mass politics, with its vulgar, material ends will destroy the conditions under which creativity flourishes; in this (though the mode of expression could not be more different), Lewis approaches Sickert's blithe repudiation of liberalism and socialism.

At the same time, for Lewis, the middle class was corrupted by excessive softness, romanticism, femininity, homosexuality and subjectivity, and primitive mechanical culture may be part of the antidote: 'WE NEED THE UNCONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMANITY—their stupidity, animalism and dreams. We believe in no perfectibility except our own.'[79] 'Our own' here is the cultural elite, threatened by Communism or even excessive democratic reform. Yet there is a dialectical relationship between the artist and the mass or the crowd: 'The only possibility of renewal for the individual is into this temporary Death and Resurrection of the Crowd.'[80]

The point of *The Crowd*, then, a perverse piece of pastoralism, is to bring to the corrupted middle class a vision of their own immersion in the mass, from which some redemptive quality (of modernist form perhaps, of willing adherence to the grid) may be snatched. Yet, despite the sophistication of Lewis' dialectical thinking, given the circumstances in which it was painted (of dangerously militant action by the unions, of suffragette flouting of the law, let alone Army revolt), there is a simpler likely reading: *The Crowd* is a pessimistic and conservative piece of political painting, giving his patrons a sublime vision of working-class revolt, while assuring them of their utter distinction from the insect masses.

If Lewis successfully appealed to his elite audience of aristocratic patrons and other wealthy figures, that is no mystery. For his was an entertaining, irreverent, scandalous movement that fed off the very energies that it despised—and finally offered a comforting vision to the elites who supported it: that through opposing the mass, the elite may find in that struggle a renewal.

The period immediately before the War was Lewis', and it was not to be repeated. His attempts to restart avant-garde activity in Britain after the War met with no success, and his literary battles with Bloomsbury led him into severe material difficulties. That failure is a register of the anti-intellectual conservatism of middle-class life in the 1920s, and indeed of

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[76] Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', *The Little Review*, September 1917, 3-4.

[77] Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, p. 133.

[78] This is also the interpretation of Normand, who sees the painting as 'an impeachment of the crowd'. See Tom Normand, *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, p. 7.

[79] *Blast*, no. 1, p. 7.

[80] Lewis, 'The Crowdmaster', *Blast*, no. 2, p. 98.

much of the interwar period. Lewis' contradictory embrace of the machine environment, and his insistence in describing in painting and in writing its effects on human beings, was particularly uncomfortable in the post-war period, which for many was a time of mourning for and recoil from industrialised slaughter.

An indication of Lewis' oppositional principles can be found in his prose which, unlike that of most critics (and indeed artist-critics) of the period is dense, provocative, spiky and even rebarbative. It is the antithesis of the eminently reasonable, patiently educative tone that prevails particularly in British writing about contemporary art, as if some genteel and reassuringly normal chap at the club was to guide you through befuddling displays of the modern, without too much troubling of the mind with arcane notions. We may sample some of this writing to get the general tone:

> Some of his [Sickert's] Camden Town interiors have been called morbid, but the artist was only aiming at the truth, and the truth always contains beauty. … The truth should never offend us, and if Sickert has been talked about largely because of his paintings of 'low life' in low tones, it must also be acknowledged that he can transform even a sordid theme by the glittering magic of his style.[81]

> A few modern artists may be Communists, and some undoubtedly are Jews… But the majority of modern artists are neither Jews nor Communists, nor racialists nor politicians of any kind. They are just artists, and, if anything, the more 'modern' they are in spirit as artists, the more disinterested and detached they become. In short, the good artist is very rarely interested in anything but his art.[82]

> …I am not at all certain that the historian of that distant time who looks back with justified condescension upon ours may not perhaps envy a little the historian, however ludicrous his errors, to whom the artists who are the common objects of their study were familiar figures, known either directly or through friends. Therefore it seems to me that there is an obligation upon those to whom has fallen the privilege of knowing artists, to place on record something about their personalities and their opinions.[83]

> I have given as sincere an appreciation of Picasso as my inveterate habits of valuing work will permit. I cannot touch here on what may be designated his psychology nor on the psychology of the worshippers and theologians of his paintings with their metaphysical Gnostic or Freudian interpretation turn him into a cult hero of a new mysticism.[84]

> In the arts it is sometimes necessary but always dangerous to theorize. Theorists tend to produce art that may be serious but can hardly be sensuous or human.[85]

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[81] Frank Rutter, *Some Contemporary Artists*, Leonard Parsons, London 1922, pp. 54-5.
[82] Herbert Read, *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture*, Faber & Faber Ltd, London 1933, p. 13.
[83] John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters: Sickert to Smith*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London 1952, p. 20.
[84] Bernard Berenson, 'Picasso', in *Essays in Appreciation*, Chapman & Hall, London 1958, p. 77.
[85] Eric Newton, *The Meaning of Beauty*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1962, p. 182.

And the critics were predominantly chaps. McKibbin has written eloquently about the great and persistent sexual segregation at all levels of English society into the 1950s, despite women's growing numbers in the workplace, and that division was held to faithfully in mainstream art discourse.[86] The harder, class-conscious claims of Marxist criticism, established in Britain in the 1930s by Klingender, Blunt and others, did not of course offer such comforts. Indeed, a strong feature of leftist writing in Britain is that it allied complex analysis and a clear but elevated literary style—think, for example, of the work of John Berger, E.P. Thompson and T.J. Clark. As we shall see, when a large leftist front in British art is mobilised in the 1970s, it included women, and its writing, produced generally from within the universities—technical, complex, unyielding in its intellectualism—was in overt reaction to the clubbable criticism that preceded it.

During the Great War, state-sponsored scenes of class harmony at home and on the Front, some provided even by Lewis, prevailed. During the war, the national government (apart from bringing much of the economy under its direct control) favoured union labour, in part because it was less liable to strike.[87] In the post-war settlement, the main gain of the working classes was a reduction in working hours from an average of 54 to 48 hours a week. For the first time, week-day diversions, particularly the cinema, were open to working-class people.[88] Another powerful social factor, novel in Britain, was the unprecedented militarisation of the nation which had previously only maintained a small, professional army, not the standing armies of millions of conscripts found in continental Europe. The newly enlarged armed forces, with the prestige of their victories in the War (repeated, of course, in 1945), became bastions of Toryism.[89] The overall effect of the post-war settlement by the mid 1920s was, as McKibbin puts it, to enthrone the middle class as the dominant force in national life, while not unseating the upper class, and subordinating the lower class.[90]

Yet this was not the way the middle class saw matters. There was another durable aspect of middle-class identity that McKibbin stresses: while many features of the middle class changed in the period he examines from 1918 to 1951, it remained (with some variations in intensity) anti-working class, and defined its own identity through that hostility.[91] That hostility was borne of the genuine though short-lived post-1918 change in the respective fortunes of the middle class which for a few years lost ground to labourers, and to the association of that time with the despised figure of the profligate, showy nouveau-riche war profiteer.[92] In part, the divide was based on the great disparity of life experiences: the middle-class were predominantly salary- rather than wage-earners, recipients of a predictable income that allowed for planning, saving and insurance that the vagaries of lay-offs and overtime did not.[93] Enmity towards the newly powerful unions was sustained, as they increased membership, promulgated strikes and made governments pliant.[94] That solid hostility contributed much to the defeat of the General Strike, as middle-class people

[86] McKibbin, pp. 88f.
[87] Lloyd, pp. 62-3.
[88] Lloyd, pp. 93-4.
[89] This is a point made by Wheatcroft, who notes that it was a powerful pillar of Tory support. See ch. 3.
[90] McKibbin, p. 528.
[91] McKibbin, 50.
[92] McKibbin, p. 54.
[93] McKibbin, p. 71.
[94] McKibbin, pp. 56-7.

stepped in to drive trams and trains, and shift coal.[95] It was also seen in the general hostility shown to the idea of widening education in the inter-war period, defended with the reflex notions that it would make people less willing to do manual work and would exacerbate the 'servant problem'.[96]

The main political task of the interwar period, as seen by both major parties, was to foster tranquillity and stability, softening class conflict. It was exemplified by Baldwin (and similarly Ramsay McDonald), in an 'emollient, patriotic ruralism'.[97] Rigid economic stability was maintained at the price of growth, and there was no taste for imperial 'adventures'.[98] Such a vision and policy appealed to a middle class that, as we have seen, drowned its religious variegation, along with the division in any region between natives and the many incomers, with its polite, anti-intellectual conversational culture.[99]

Meredith Frampton, *A Game of Patience*, 1937

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[95] McKibbin, p. 58.
[96] Lloyd, p. 94.
[97] Wiener, p. 58.
[98] Lloyd, p. 106.
[99] McKibbin, p. 96.

Something of the middle-class ideals of the period can be grasped through Meredith Frampton's extraordinarily controlled and labour-intensive paintings of the inter-war years, pursued methodically in a style that changed little from the mid 1920s up to the Second World War. While there was a good deal of polite painting of calm interior scenes and gentle landscapes, in Frampton that ideal reaches a peculiar intensity. His style was eloquently pinned down by Richard Morphet, who wrote that Frampton aspired to model three-dimensional objects in paint, did so with extreme lucidity, and achieved in his work 'a quite exceptional sense of permanence and stasis'.[100] The sitters for his portraits were middle-class achievers—public servants, scientists and cultural figures. As Morphet notes, the totality of control in these pictures encompassed not just their calmness of scene, lack of ambiguity in description and perfection of technique but extended to their frequent reference to planning, architecture, diagrams and maps: 'Orderliness is at the heart of his view of the world.'[101] These pictures also reflected changes in the composition of the middle-class, which were taking place rapidly in the 1920s and 1930s, as the number of clerks fell and the numbers of technical and scientific workers, along with business people, rose.[102]

The domestic and rural calm of many British paintings following the First World War has been seen as a deliberate compensation for its violent chaos.[103] This was part of a general trend to neo-classical order following the war across Europe (and particularly in France and Italy), though none was as concerted or as unopposed as in Britain, where avant-garde activity virtually disappeared for more than a decade.[104] Frampton had served in the War as a map-maker, plotting from aerial photographs the continually shifting features of front-line landscapes under barrage.[105] Frampton's total commitment to order and stasis reflected the political effort to instil social calm in the nation following the War, alongside the longer term middle-class aspiration to ease. It is evident in *A Game of Patience*, where the model is an idealised middle-class woman, contemplative but at leisure in her neo-classical surroundings that open onto a quiet and ordered rural landscape. The discipline of her clothing, hair, pose and gestures is as ordered as anything in interwar Léger, and while the fruit and corn on the table gesture to fertility, the clerical collar hints at strict morality.

This middle trend in British painting was merely a more extreme version of a rentier ideal that obtained generally across modern art, and was brilliantly characterised by Meyer Schapiro, who dwelt on its characteristic subject matter: natural spectacles seen from the viewpoint of the relaxed spectator; artificial spectacles and entertainments seen similarly; the artist's studio and its accoutrements; 'isolated intimate fields, like a table covered with the

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[100] Richard Morphet, *Meredith Frampton*, Tate Gallery, London 1982, p. 11. The timing of the Tate's retrospective of Frampton showed, as Morphet pointed out, the waning of 'too exclusive an emphasis of the avant-garde of those [inter-war] years' under the impact of postmodernism.
[101] Morphet, p. 20.
[102] McKibbin, p. 529.
[103] This is in part the argument of David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art, 1914-30*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1997, ch. 5.
[104] On that European tendency, see *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, De Chirico and the New Classicism*, Tate Gallery, London 1990; and for France, Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: the Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925*, Thames and Hudson, London 1989.
[105] Morphet, p. 14.

private instruments of idle sensation', in all of which the viewer is constructed as a passive consumer, and the world of action is eliminated.[106]

In many parts of the world, any prospects for the calm enjoyment of wealth were shattered by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and its long-drawn-out economic and political consequences. Yet Britain's experience of the Great Depression, known here as 'the Slump', was in sharp contrast to that in Europe and the US. Due to the slow growth rates and relatively high unemployment of the 1920s (in sharp contrast to France and especially the US), when the Slump occurred it was slower to make an impact, and did so with less disastrous effects. Although growth rates were low even in the 1920s, from the middle of that decade the middle class had greatly improved their economic position. The 1920s had seen a boom in the buying of British art, and the buyers were middle class, often buying for speculative purposes.[107] Their tastes tended to be more conservative than those of richer patrons, and they particularly bought landscapes in oils and watercolour, as well as prints.[108]

As it developed, the Slump was geographically very uneven in its effects (as Thatcher's first recession was to be nearly fifty years later), with the result that the government was able to rely on its support in the prosperous South, while northern industrial towns, particularly mining and shipbuilding areas were hurt most. Since the areas that suffered most from the Depression were solidly Labour even at the best of times, it made little difference to the government's electoral prospects. Rather than try to reduce unemployment, it was government policy to improve the benefit system through centralisation.[109] The Jarrow marches, and other such manifestations, were meant to bring to Southern attention the extent of suffering in the North.

Again, the experience of the middle class was very unlike that of the working class, and it widened the gulf between their political outlooks. Most working-class people in the 1930s experienced periods of unemployment, most middle-class people did not; furthermore, the middle class benefited from falling prices, and were able to increase their consumer spending.[110] One of the things they bought, given that other investments seemed unattractive, were houses, and new suburban ribbon developments spread across the country. 300,000 houses a year were built in the late 1930s, and in the interwar years the British housing stock was increased by a half; they were occupied overwhelmingly by white-collar professionals.[111] Indeed, the slump helped this development by keeping interest rates low. The rise in home ownership, almost exclusively a middle-class affair, was fostered by Conservative governments that saw it as a bulwark against socialism, allowing building to take place without planning, and subsidising much of the construction.[112]

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[106] Meyer Schapiro, 'The Social Bases of Art' (1936), in *Worldview in Painting—Art and Society: Selected Papers*, George Braziller, New York 1999.
[107] Stephenson, pp. 31-2.
[108] Stephenson, pp. 32, 35.
[109] Lloyd, p. 164.
[110] McKibbin, pp. 60-1.
[111] See Paul Oliver, Introduction', in Paul Oliver / Ian Davis/ Ian Bentley, *Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and its Enemies*, Pimlico, London 1994, pp. 13-14.
[112] McKibbin, p. 77.

The ideal of suburban living was founded on middle-class attachments to rustic imagery, and with it hostility to and the ideal of separation from industry and the people that its factories created. It also, of course, did much to cause the destruction of the very environment it purported to value, particularly in the south of England.

The spread of suburbia and the rise of commuting had profound effects on middle-class social life. As McKibbin puts it:

> The social separation of men from work and the physical separation of men and women from collective life or informal sociability became… a fact of middle-class life—as it was later to become a fact of working-class life.[113]

Middle-class sociability was of necessity organised, generally in clubs and associations, and was sexually segregated, in a manner that was in tension with the ideal of companionate marriage centred on the home.[114] Something of that worry—of women's isolation in the suburban home—is evident in the Frampton painting (Fig. 3); his model, after all, is mustering her discipline to play patience.

Much middle-class consumer spending in the 1930s was done for the home, and avant-garde artists' responded to this new environment in which their conventional means of living had been removed in an entirely rational manner, moving to make small items for the large number of new modern homes. Much of the mildly modern, small-scale work produced in the 1930s was meant to inhabit these mutedly modern and eclectic suburban villas (as well as urban flats). Here even abstraction lost the radical connotations it may have once had, and became simply decorative and unthreateningly modern. Some of it was sold through shops, such as Harrods and Selfridges.[115] The names of some 1930s shows spelt the matter out: the Zwemmer Gallery's *Room and Book* (1932) or Duncan Miller Gallery's *Modern Pictures for Modern Rooms: An Exhibition of Abstract Art in Contemporary Settings* (1936). As Andrew Stephenson has noted, Bloomsbury, and Roger Fry in particular, condemned this development as fostering poor-quality art, which was purchased by (in his Arnoldian terminology) complacent, hypocritical, materialist middle-class philistines.[116]

Artists' responses to the Slump have been analysed by Andrew Stephenson, who sees in them more than a pragmatic series of measures to make money out of art criticism, interior design, or the painting of comfortably British landscape works. Rather, it was a move from the upper-middle-class world of Bloomsbury, that (at least in their statements) despised in art the merest taint of commerce, and for whom the word 'professional' was an insult, towards a career-oriented, professional status, directed towards the patronage of business and the state, and cultivating new middle-class buyers who were as interested in investment as in aesthetic quality.[117] He argues that Unit One, formed in 1934 as a collective to raise the profile of modern art in Britain, directed its efforts at the growing middle-class market for art, assuring their buyers of their professionalism, touring the regions, stirring up press

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[113] McKibbin, p. 81.
[114] McKibbin, p. 87-8, 90.
[115] See Stephenson, p. 40.
[116] See Stephenson, pp. 37-8, who cites Roger Fry, 'Culture and Anarchy', in *Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art*, Chatto and Windus, London 1926, p. 141.
[117] Stephenson, passim.

controversy, tailoring avant-garde layout and rhetoric to corporate advertising ends, and finally branding themselves with their collective identity.[118] This was no once-and-for-all development but rather one of series of ebbs and flows of the professional ideal in art, tied to the economic cycle. For John Berger, for example, modelling the protagonist of his novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) on the émigré sculptor Peter Peri, avant-garde separation from market demands and an utter devotion to the expression of oppositional politics through the medium of paint had become the ideal.[119]

The slump polarised political opinion, as did the dramatic events in Europe, from the comparative success of the dictatorships of Left and Right in dealing with the recession to the Spanish Civil War. Even so, Britain did not develop a mass Communist Party of the type that formed in France, Germany or Spain. At its pre-war height, it had only 16,000 members (by contrast the PCF had 328,000 members in 1937, and the KPD before its banning by the Nazis around 350,000).[120]

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[118] Stephenson, p. 46.

[119] John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time*, Secker & Warburg, London 1958. For Peri as a model, see Robert Radford, *Art for a Purpose: The Artists' International Association, 1933-1953*, Winchester School of Art Press, Winchester 1987, p. 75.

[120] For the French figures, see Edward Mortimer, *The Rise of the French Communist Party, 1920-1947*, Faber and Faber, London 1984, p. 251.

James Boswell, *The Means Test*, 1934

That comparative weakness may be registered through the diverse activities and modest success of the Artists' International Association. Its publication *5 on Revolutionary Art* (1935) was highly eclectic, and demonstrated little in the way of systematic Marxist thinking about contemporary art. Its diverse range of writers, including Herbert Read, who argued that high modernist art was to be recommended as keeping art inviolate from social contamination until such time as society will be able to appreciate art's universal qualities.[121] Indeed, Read's essay, the first in the book, glibly associated 'revolutionary art' with revolutionary politics, making dangerous radicals of Hepworth and Nicholson, and the entire abstract wing of modernism who, as Read put it in a tellingly spun manner, 'are more or less openly in sympathy with the Communist movement'.[122] In any case, he continued, the essential components of art are archetypal, the product of the unchanging character of human nature and the physical world, and for this reason the artist may justifiably 'take up an attitude of detachment'.[123] It hardly needs saying that this position was entirely unmarked by dialectics

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[121] See Robert Radford, *Art for a Purpose: The Artists' International Association, 1933-1953*, Winchester School of Art Press, Winchester 1987, pp. 66-7; Betty Rea, ed., *5 on Revolutionary Art*, Wishart, London 1935.
[122] Read, 'What is Revolutionary Art?', in Betty Rea, ed., *5 on Revolutionary Art*, Wishart, London 1935, p. 14.
[123] Read, p. 15.

or materialism. The only contribution with a firm basis in Marxist thinking was that of the émigré Francis Klingender. He attempted to place the character of modern art in a broad art-historical sweep tied to the rise and fall of the bourgeoisie as a force for radical change; in this schema, the 'technological revolution' of modern art, fettered to the escape from content, a flight from the world of a decaying class, had no more meaning than a kaleidoscope.[124] The eccentricity of the contributions provided little basis for the development of a sustained materialist discourse on art and culture. Indeed, there was little in British Marxist thinking that could match the sophistication found in Europe, nor would there be until the end of the 1950s.[125]

If there was an exception, it was the isolated figure of Christopher Caudwell, the most brilliant Marxist cultural critic of the 1930s, who struggled against elements of the British lack of modernity, notably the divide between art and science which he saw as a prime symptom of the crisis if bourgeois culture.[126] His work also fixed on the contradictions that the artist threatened to expose, in particular the compulsive character of market relations as against the illusion of individual freedom.[127] At a time when there were widespread worries about the social isolation that the retreat to the suburbs created, Cauldwell wrote that 'The deepest and most ineradicable bourgeois illusion… is that man is free not through but in spite of social relations.'[128] In the face of countervailing evidence, the growing complexity of economic organisation and the rise of the state, the bourgeois illusion of social liberty reproduces itself, he claimed, in psychoanalysis and the arts. Determination of the individual cannot be admitted (and indeed this remains a central feature of contemporary art).[129] He further argued that art could alter people's emotions and outlooks in an adaptive way, in response to rapidly changing social relations.[130] Yet his work was widely misunderstood within even Marxist circles, and his legacy is even now far more uncertain and luminous than that of the adherents of the backward-looking idylls.[131]

The core artists of the AIA, including James Boswell, leant heavily on German models, particularly the work of George Grosz. Boswell gave up fine art during the 1930s, not only of necessity to do advertising work for Shell but also to make lithographs for leftist newspapers and magazines, including the *Daily Worker* and *Left Review*. Class warfare of an overt kind is waged here, with strong satires of bourgeois behaviour, alongside fond and tragic scenes of working-class life. In *The Means Test* he fixes effectively on the consequences of the state's administration of welfare for the long-term unemployed. When AIA work was

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[124] F.D. Klingender, 'Content and Form in Art', in *Five on Revolutionary Art*, p. 43.

[125] Ths point is made by John Roberts in the introduction to his edited collection, *Art Has No History! The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, Verso, London 1994, pp. 6-7.

[126] E.P. Thompson, 'Christopher Caudwell', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 2, Winter 1995, p. 309.

[127] Thompson, p. 316.

[128] Christopher Caudwell, *Studies in a Dying Culture*, John Lane The Bodley Head, London 1938, p. 69; cited in Thompson, p. 346.

[129] Thompson, p. 347, citing Caudwell, *Further Studies in a Dying Culture*, Bodley Head, London 1949, p. 72. This theme is an important element of the analysis of the avant garde in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1996; I apply it to the realm of contemporary art in my book, *Art Incorporated*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

[130] Thompson, p. 329, citing Caudwell, *Studies*, pp. 54, 50.

[131] E.P. Thompson's important piece was an attempt to rehabilitate Caudwell's reputation. 'Christopher Caudwell', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 2, Winter 1995, pp. 305-53. It originally appeared in *The Socialist Register*, 1977.

shown in Moscow in 1937, one critic wrote that while the exhibitors successfully revealed the bourgeoisie for what they are, their depictions of the heroism of the class struggle left much to be desired.[132] While this was a predictable critique, it had some point to it, either because heroism was in short supply, or that what there was remained small-scale and isolated, or that artistic models for depicting it lacked any plausible use in Britain. There has been relatively little art-historical literature about this socialist tendency in British art in the 1930s, and very little about Boswell, whose attentions were also turned on the snobbier pretensions of the art world, for instance in an angry though amusing depiction of the International Surrealist exhibition in 1936, contrasting the manners of the toffs who frequented the show with a quote from Herbert Read about the desperately disrespectful character of the work displayed there.[133]
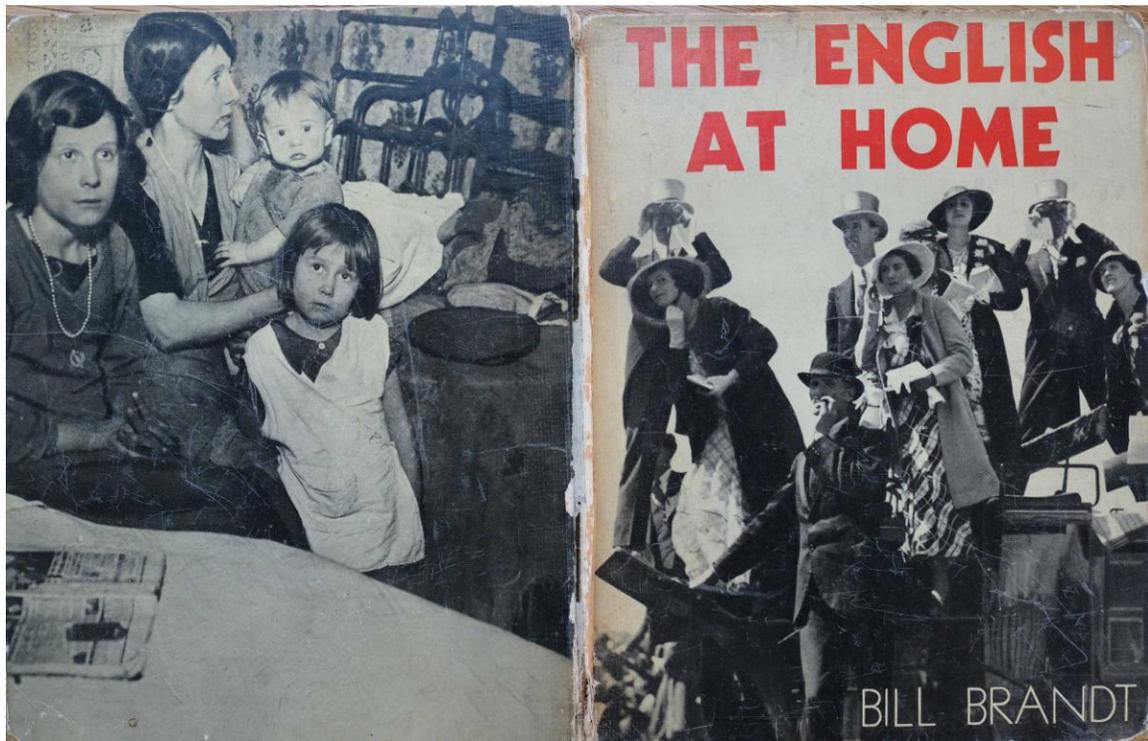
Bill Brandt, *The English at Home*, 1936, front and back cover

Against such views of calm retreat and contemplation, and indeed against their complement in depictions of entertainingly raucous working-class entertainment, were works which attempted to track social difference within a single frame, and in doing so produce a pictorial rendition of the social state of the nation. The nation's inhabitants, through the mass media, were emerging into consciousness of themselves as a social entity. It became widely known

[132] Alfred Durus, review in *International Literature* (Moscow), August 1937, pp. 109-10; cited in Herbert Roth, 'James Boswell: A New Zealand Artist in London', *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, no. 65, December 1977, n.p.

[133] The piece was published in *Left Review* in July 1936. Paul Hogarth, in one of the few catalogues devoted to Boswell's work notes that this neglect was due in large part to prominent radical critics, such as Read, abjuring anything that was 'low' or propagandist. See 'James Boswell: Eyewitness of the Thirties', in Nottingham University Art Gallery, *James Boswell, 1906-71*, Nottingham 1976, p. 10.

in the Slump that half the population was ill fed, and that the poorest 30 per cent could not afford the means of subsistence.[134]

One such view, which has since become very well known, though it was a commercial failure at the time, is Bill Brandt's book, *The English at Home*. It was new not only in presenting an overall view of the English nation but as its title suggests in the technical novelty of showing them in dark interiors, with the use of the flash-bulbs.[135] The book was not intended by publisher or author to carry a radical political message—and indeed much is done to defuse it, not least with the last page showing doffed top-hats with the legend 'God Save the King'. Yet in the polarised social conditions of the 1930s, it could certainly be read politically. Many of Brandt's juxtapositions over the page (and indeed on the front and back covers), while certainly full of social colour, point to an inequality that went beyond mere English social habits: the drawn and weary face of the man in the centre of 'Workmen's Restaurant' is contrasted with the relaxed main figure of 'Clubmen's Sanctuary' and the lowered head of the serving-man who waits on its members. Even when the juxtapositions are not made directly over the page, even a casual viewer will bring the faces of the children in 'Their Only Window' to the pictures of middle-class recreation in expansive, sunlit gardens and golf courses, and to richly laid Mayfair dinner tables.

The middle class, the implied readership of the book, are not exactly excluded from its pages, though they are certainly squeezed between the exoticisms of flat cap and top hat. They appear in sporting guises, or wearing costumes or fulfilling highly identifiable roles (golfer, horse-race fan, army officer, professor), and occasionally as commuters crossing bridges or streets. Of their professional life we see nothing, for both Brandt the émigré and his publisher were more interested in playing to costumed cliché, in part because the book with its bilingual captions was directed at a European audience (where there was a larger market for photography).[136] In one picture there does appear a middle-class woman at home, nearly as disciplined in clothing, coiffure and pose as Frampton's, though she is engaged in another solidly identifiable English ritual—'Afternoon Tea'.

This vision of a differentiated national unity had its comforts. Raymond Mortimer in his skilful introduction that navigates between the dangers of Bolshevism and conservative nationalism, wrote of returning to England after a time abroad and being struck by all that would normally be unseen, 'the hedges and steeples and bungalows', English tea and 'bobbies' and *Punch*.[137] Mortimer also focuses on the agreeable quaintness and strangeness of the rigidity of English habits of dress, but beyond this, in writing of slum children, a miner's family and men at a hostel, asks: 'Is there any English man or woman who can look at these without a profound feeling of shame?'[138] Mortimer writes that 'One's pleasure in being English is somewhat modified by knowledge of this unnecessary, this humiliating squalor'.

[134] Lloyd, p. 176.

[135] This is pointed out by Mark Haworth-Booth in Bill Brandt, *Behind the Camera: Photographs, 1928-1983*, Phaidon, Oxford 1985, p. 14.

[136] Paul Delany, *Bill Brandt*, Jonathan Cape, London 2004, p. 115.

[137] Raymond Mortimer, 'Introduction' to Bill Brandt, *The English at Home*, B.T. Batsford Ltd, London 1936, p. 3.

[138] Brandt, p. 7.

But he also believes that such squalor can be ameliorated without destroying England's 'pleasant traditions and individual liberties', though those will be imperilled if it is not.[139]

While the book had an ethnographic aspect, related to Brandt's German upbringing and its courting of foreign markets, it had nothing of the rigour and systematic character of August Sander's examination of his nation.[140] While Sander attempted to fix the identities of individuals, to place them in strata at a time of bewildering social change, Brandt's dwelt on conventional and (it seemed) unchangeable certainties in a society institutionally protected from the gales of modernity.

In the same period, another photographic model for the depiction of class difference is found in the activities of Mass Observation, an organisation dedicated to making an anthropology of the British working class. It was initially funded by wealthy patrons, including industrialists, and while the intellectual interests of its members spanned science and surrealism, its aim was to illumine that class who were seen by those not born into it, 'as almost a race apart'.[141] Tom Harrison, one of the founders, had been engaged in anthropological field work in Malekula, and had published a popular account of that work, influenced by Malinowski.[142] While the mass of diarists were mainly lower-middle class urban types with an interest in leftist politics, those employed directly by Mass Observation were Oxbridge graduates of independent means.[143]In addition to its call for and collection of social diaries from the general public, Mass Observation undertook a large-scale examination of Bolton which took in a wide variety of techniques to wrest facts from their working-class subjects, including initiating conversations, sometimes incognito, eavesdropping and following them.[144] It also took in photography, and in 1937-38 Humphrey Spender, who worked as a photojournalist for the *Daily Mirror*, took a number of short trips to Bolton to photograph its inhabitants.[145]

While Brandt often elicited the cooperation of his subjects, Mass Observation preferred methods of depiction that left subjects unawares. Spender, with varying degrees of success, spied on his subjects in streets, markets and pubs (though not, because of the need to remain invisible, in homes or factories). He would hide his Leica under his jacket.

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[139] Brandt, p. 8.

[140] August Sander, *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs 1892-1952*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1986.

[141] Jeremy Mulford, ed., *Worktown People: Photographs from Northern England, 1937-1938, by Humphrey Spender*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1978, pp. 7-8; cited in Deborah Frizzell, *Humphrey Spender's Humanist Landscapes: Photo-Documents, 1932-1942*, Yale Center for British Art/ Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, New Haven 1997, p. 28.

[142] Tom Harrison, *Savage Civilisation*, Gollancz, London 1937; see the account in Rod Varley, *Mass-Observation, 1937-1987*, Watermans, Brentford 1987, p. 7.

[143] Varley, p. 11.

[144] Varley, p. 11.

[145] Frizzell, p. 28.

Humphrey Spender, *Dominoes in the Pub, Bolton*, 1937

In *Dominoes in the Pub, Bolton*, the image is determined by these means, and is far less accomplished than Brandt's set-up photograph of a domestic interior that appeared on the back cover of *The English at Home*. The viewpoint is low, since Spender could not risk raising the camera to his eye, and the narrow band of focus is on the hands and beer mugs of the far players—no flash could be used to supplement the available light and allow greater depth of field. There is also a little blur caused by the movement of the figures. In these ways, the recording power of photography is compromised by the techniques used to remain unobserved.

The results are neither an ethnographic measuring of the subject common in imperialist photography, nor the participant-observer model (of the kind that Malinowski had undertaken in the 1920s, and illustrated with his own photographs) but rather photographs of working-class people caught unawares by an outsider.[146] Spender's pictures were not used by Mass Observation in its publications, in part because of the expense of photographic reproduction, and in part because Harrison had little idea of how to use them alongside the great volume of textual facts that had been gathered.[147]

An aim of Mass Observation had been to bring facts about the social character of the nation to its inhabitants, and some of its publications, which were critical about the lack of information imparted by the government and the deference of the press, hit a popular nerve. Its analysis of the Munich Crisis, *Britain by Mass Observation*, sold 100,000 copies in 10 days.[148] Even before the war, its skills were turned to electioneering, and were credited with the winning for Labour a by-election in Fulham by informing the candidate about the constituents' most urgent concerns. It was also involved in sending out false Conservative

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[146] See, for example, Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1926.
[147] Frizell, p. 29. She also provides an account of the publication of Spender's work from the 1970s, pp. 9-10.
[148] C. Madge/ T.H. Harrisson, *Britain by Mass-Observation*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1939; Varley, p. 17.

campaign literature to confuse their supporters.[149] Yet its role changed rapidly when war was declared, and it became an organ of government, its skills in social data-gathering being in advance of the newly founded polling organisations Gallup and MORI.[150] It was used by the Ministry of Information to assess the attitudes of the population to war and the Blitz.

As is well known, the Second World War altered the balance of power between the classes, and enabled the Atlee government to set in place the elements of a welfare state, including unemployment benefit that was no longer means tested, the National Health Service and an expanded secondary education system. Once again, a considerable state propaganda effort produced much art that showed the classes striving together in unison against the Nazi threat, and these works were shown to wide audiences not only in galleries but in pubs, social clubs and schools. War propaganda tended to dwell, less on the iniquity of the Nazis (the true extent of which was not known to the British public until the end of the war), but on the promised reformation of the country when the conflict ended.

Yet, in some ways, the War (while it lessened class antagonisms, at least for its duration), reinforced the image of England as a fundamentally rural nation, as against industrial and inhuman German might.[151] Workers were the basis of the war effort but the imagined nation that they were defending was not one founded on working-class culture. In fine art, the isolation of Britain from European influences produced a surge of rustic neo-Romanticism, which included John Piper's ruins and idyllic rural scenes. In Alberto Cavalcanti's famous propaganda film, *Went the Day Well?* (1943), imagining the consequences of a Nazi incursion, it is an archetypal English village, inhabited by quirky loveable folk who come under threat—and heroically resist. In the years that followed, St Ives once again became an important locus for British art, as pastoral versions of US abstraction were produced by Patrick Heron and others, in a compact that was undoubtedly self-consciously modernist, but also retained an engagement with a particular landscape, light, and the apparently eternal rhythms of waves, tides and the flight of gulls.

One large switch in policy, and one of the major gains for the working class, was that the state became committed to the reduction of unemployment (following Keynes' theories) by running a budget deficit during economic downturns.[152] Though the means had changed, social calm was still the aim: the unions were pacified by sympathetic government policy, and genuine forms of consultation and power-sharing. Stability of prices was valued above economic growth.[153] While the hated means test was ended, state benefits were not targeted at the poorest, and indeed the middle class benefited from the creation of the Health Service and particularly the expansion of secondary education more than any other sector.[154] The ideal of equal treatment could not survive the extent to which British class and social structures were left untouched, particularly in education, where, overwhelmingly, working-class children went to secondary modern schools and middle-class ones went to grammars.

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[149] Julian Trevelyan, *Indigo Days*, Macgibbon & Kee, London 1957, pp. 100-1.
[150] Varley, p. 18.
[151] Wiener, p. 77.
[152] Lloyd, p. 233. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Macmillan & Co., London 1936.
[153] Lloyd, p. 307.
[154] McKibbin, pp. 63-4.

Those state and civil institutions which were strongly defended by vested interests (such as the public schools) were left alone.[155]

Nevertheless, postwar reforms, particularly in education, led to much optimism about the new society that would be engendered. In a book about children's art, R.R. Tomlinson (an inspector of art for the London County Council) believed that the reform of art education to encourage creativity would stimulate the full maturity of people's imaginative power, and cited Matthew Arnold's hope that culture would do away with class and lead 'all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light'.[156] Even the suburbs (much despised by the architectural profession which had had no hand in their design) received sympathetic, detailed and affectionate attention in a book by J.M. Richards and John Piper. Richards argued that the suburban ideal was reformable, and that the suburban world should be approached with 'respect and decorum'. Piper's illustrations showed houses cosseted by mature trees and shrubs, and garlanded with touching fragments of diverse architectural fantasy.[157]

Henry Moore, *Family Group*, 1949

A fundamental change for the art world was that state funding continued after the war, though, following Keynes' prescriptions, the model was transformed from one that favoured

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[155] McKibbin, p. 535.

[156] R.R. Tomlinson, *Children as Artists*, King Penguin Books, London 1944, p. 30.

[157] J.M. Richards, *The Castles on the Ground: The Anatomy of Suburbia*, illus. John Piper, John Murray Publishers, London 1973; the first edition was published in 1946.

wide public participation to the defence of an elite view of quality against encroaching mass culture.[158] State funding was evident in the placing of public sculpture in the new towns, council estates and schools that were a large part of post-war reconstruction. These tended to reinforce traditional family values and gender roles that had been fractured by the war. The remarkably differentiated and stable world of gender relations in the middle class has been thoroughly analysed by McKibbin. It was of course put under pressure by events, and women did move into new professions—notably clerking—up to the 1950s, but where they did so the status and wages in those professions fell.[159] Much quasi-official art played a role in restoring the old familial order. For example, one cast of Moore's 1949 *Family Group* was placed outside Peter and Alison Smithson's Hunstanton School; it trod a finely judged line between the advanced guard of US modernism and the dangers of Socialist Realism, in producing a modern, humanist ideal of the nuclear family. It is a vision of universal human values in which class difference is erased by its smooth, generalised surfaces. When another Moore *Family Group* was unveiled in Harlow New Town in 1956, Kenneth Clark was reported as saying that it 'was a symbol of a new humanitarian civilisation of which this town itself was the complete expression'.[160] Moore became in this way one prominent official face of British art, his public sculpture widely commissioned at home, and his work constantly promoted abroad by the British Council.

The vision foundered, unsurprisingly, on economic grounds. From the early 1950s, the economy was put under considerable strain by continuing imperial military actions, which it took more frequently than any other nation, as the British state attempted to suppress anti-colonial revolt in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and elsewhere.[161] Labour and material shortages were exacerbated by large increases in military spending and by continuing conscription.[162]

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[158] For an account of these developments, see Margaret Garlake, *New Art New World: British Art in Postwar Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1998, p. 17f.

[159] McKibbin, pp. 48-9.

[160] Anon., 'Mr. Moore's "Family Group". Work Commissioned for New Town', *The Times*, 18 May 1956. For an account of Moore's quasi-official place in British art at this time, see my essay 'The Mother and Child Theme in the Work of Henry Moore', in Henry Moore Foundation, *Henry Moore: Mutter und Kind/ Mother and Child*, Much Hadham 1992, pp. 13-39.

[161] A table of British military interventions between 1949 and 1970 may be found in John Van Wingen/ Herbert K. Tillema, 'British Military Interventions after World War II: Militance in a Second-Rank Power', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1980, p. 294.

[162] Lloyd, p. 275.

Richard Hamilton, *$he*, 1958-61

Through the later 1950s and into the 1960s, British people became much wealthier, though the comparative gains were uneven, with the middle third of the earning population enjoying an income that rose faster than the rest.[163] Working-class consumerism became a concern on the left, and in influential books both Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* and Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, mourned the loss of solidarity and community that this new affluence had produced.[164] After all, many consumer goods—televisions, washing machines and above all the car—tended to shut people off from communal spaces, while the car actively destroyed them. In many respects, the limited leverage the working class obtained over the state furthered the elements of professionalisation—of higher living standards for all but the lumpenproletariat, of meritocracy and increased access to higher education, of

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[163] Lloyd, p. 315. Lloyd details these changes and notes that the provision of state services in the postwar period makes the raw figures misleading.

[164] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments*, Chatto & Windus, London 1957; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Chatto & Windus, London 1958.

(slowly) increasing equality for women; of the growth of government services and the welfare state and also of the global corporation.[165]

These effects were registered in the work of Richard Hamilton, and in parts of British Pop Art generally, in which concern about the social effects of consumerism was combined with a relish for advertising kitsch and a close backwards look at Dada, which was new at least to Britain. Art reacted slowly to technological change, noted Hamilton, asking how many cars and vacuum cleaners had appeared in twentieth-century art.[166] $he, a skilfully montaged amalgam of advertising images, including a winking eye and a toaster-vacuum cleaner hybrid, produces a perverse commercial utopia. Hamilton commented:

> The worst thing that can happen to a girl, according to the ads, is that she should fail to be exquisitely at ease in her appliance setting—the setting that now does much to establish our attitude to women in the way that her clothes alone used to. Sex is everywhere, symbolized in the glamour of mass-produced luxury—the interplay of fleshy plastic and smooth, fleshier metal.[167]

Hamilton's female is as bound to and defined by the home as Frampton's, but the middle-class solidity of the earlier model has thinned and fragmented into a spectral emanation, governed and sexualised by consumption. The combination of female body and consumer item is the same as that found in Duchamp and Picabia, and works to the same fetishistic purpose: that it is taken as consumer object (broken into discretely functioning parts) and the commodity takes on the allure of flesh.[168]

In this change, attitudes to the wealth and world power of the US were central. There were many reasons for ambivalence—Britain's siding with the US in the Cold War threatened its nuclear destruction; middle-class discomfort at the wealth and ostentation of US troops in Britain, during the straightened circumstances of the war continued to rankle,[169] and that feeling was exacerbated by the decline of Empire, and the rise of this brash, uncultivated and overtly racist power. Among the working class, admiration of the Soviet Union, founded on acute awareness of the unequal share it had taken in the defeat of Nazism, of its many millions dead, continued to be a widely held view at least up until 1956. In the new climate of consumer glut, Hamilton and others produced a declassed vision of the effects of US consumer culture that skirted between celebration and critique, but certainly welcomed the apparent flattening of cultural distinction brought about by consumerism, not least because it brought about a relaxation of middle-class moral deportment. At this time, the scene of rentier art that Schapiro had described was broken, not in favour of social action, but in a new vision of uniform passivity, based not on the ideal of idle contemplation and spectatorship but of shopping.

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[165] See Perkin, pp. xii-xiii.
[166] Hamilton, 'An Exposition of $he', in Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words, 1953-1982*, Thames and Hudson, London n.d., p. 35; originally published in *Architectural Design*, October 1962, pp. 485-6.
[167] Hamilton, p. 36.
[168] For an analysis of Hamilton's depiction of the effects of consumerism, see William R. Kaizen, 'Richard Hamilton's Tabular Image', *October*, no. 94, Autumn 2000, pp. 113-128.
[169] McKibbin, p. 65.

From the mid 1970s, this idyllic scene of conspicuous consumption for all foundered on the Oil Crisis, and the persistence of an economic condition that Keynes' theories had not anticipated—'stagflation', the combination of low growth and high inflation. The increasing synchronisation of economic cycles across the globe meant that all nations entered recession at the same time, and stagflation naturally fed union demands for catch-up wages, which further fuelled inflation.[170] Edward Heath's modernising experiments with free market ideals and increasing competition in British commerce failed, in part because they were opposed by the unions. The dominant right wing of the Labour Party offered consolation: as Wiener put it, the modernising rhetoric of the 1960s was set to rest, and both Wilson and Callaghan acquired farms, and were often photographed there, presenting themselves (as Baldwin had done) as reassuringly rural men.[171]

To return briefly to Anderson's parameters for sustained modernism which, it will be remembered, were the survival of a semi-aristocratic ruling order and culture, an indeterminate technological impetus and a semi-emergent labour movement: in the late 1970s, while Britain maintained its royal and aristocratic frameworks, there was no longer an identifiable classical culture that was sustained by them. Even less did the other features apply; Britain's industrial economy was vast but lacklustre, run down by under-investment, particularly in the public sector, and any attempt to invest it with modernist romance would have seemed absurd. The labour movement's aims were thoroughly well known—and among most of the middle class and even much of the working class—mocked and despised. By this point, the in any case weak impetus of British modernism was dead.
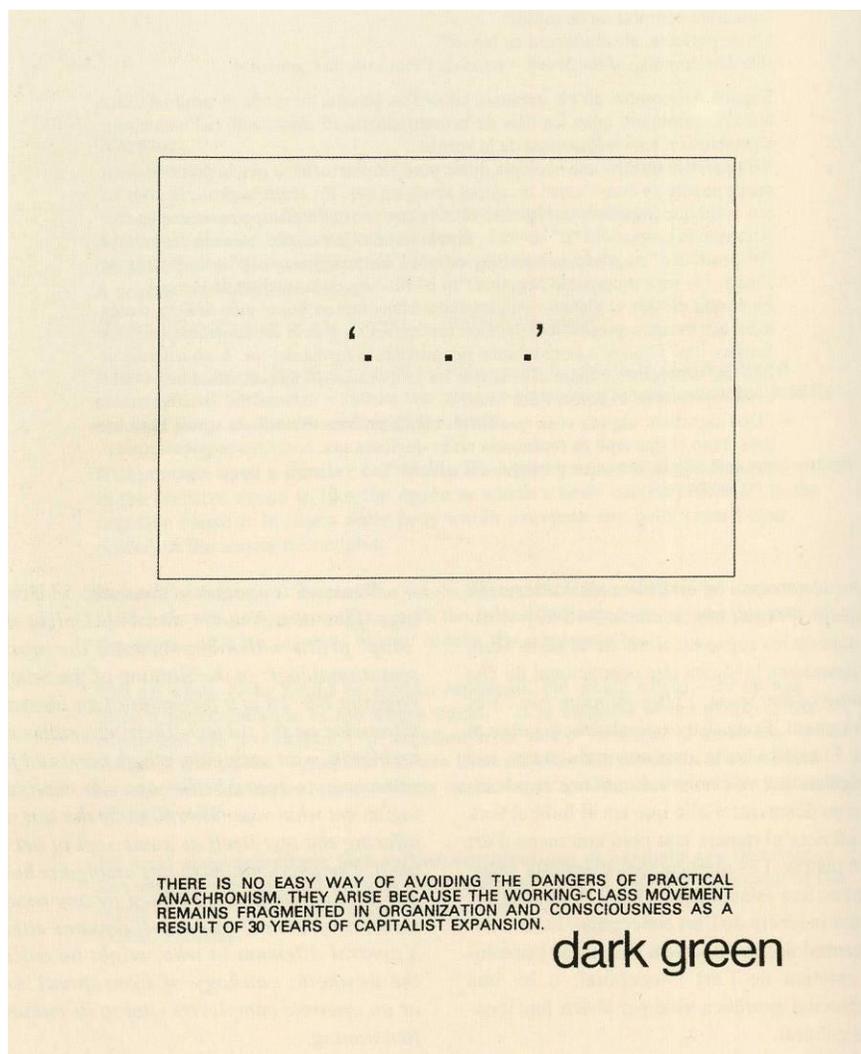
What had been created, however, in the expansion of the universities and of state funding for the arts, was a strand of contemporary art that could stand relatively free of the market. The ambit of this art was academic, and it was a product of the height of state command of the economy, in that it relied for its creation and consumption on a segment of middle-class state employees—lecturers, teachers, social workers and so on, who had regular contact with working-class people. The artists of this strand were undoubtedly members of the professional class who finally looked to the state (often through the medium of the university) for the ultimate ratification of their status and credentials.[172] We have seen that a range of art criticism in Britain had remained gentlemanly in tone but this new strand was anything but: it was determinedly radical, properly informed by Marxist social and cultural theory (being made available in translation), and sternly technical.[173] The products of Art & Language, in both their writings and art works, may stand as an indicative measure of the change. Both are aimed firmly at the university educated (indeed most likely postgraduate) audience.

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[170] Lloyd, p. 385.

[171] Wiener, p. 164.

[172] For Perkin, this is the fundamental distinction of such professionals from the entrepreneur whose competence is of course tested against the market. See p. xxiii. For an analysis of university-generated art in the US, see Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1999.

[173] The translations of works by European Marxists such as Benjamin, Gramsci and Lukács appearing first in *New Left Review* from 1966, and then in editions by New Left Books had a huge impact on the development of Marxism in Britain. For an account of these developments, see Lin Chun, *The British New Left*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1993.

THERE IS NO EASY WAY OF AVOIDING THE DANGERS OF PRACTICAL
ANACHRONISM. THEY ARISE BECAUSE THE WORKING-CLASS MOVEMENT
REMAINS FRAGMENTED IN ORGANIZATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS AS A
RESULT OF 30 YEARS OF CAPITALIST EXPANSION.

dark green

Art & Language, *Dialectical Materialism (Dark Green)*, 1975

To take a single example from Art & Language, they made a piece in 1975 called *Dialectical Materialism (Dark Green)*, which looked like one of their map works, and proposed puzzling relations between its various elements: the described colour, an ellipsis in quotation marks and a political slogan (Fig. 8). Art & Language themselves later explained:

> What would you insert (write) in the black space of the ellipsis-in-the-box-in-quotes (the most prominent place in the work) given that what might appear there would be indexed by both the political slogan and the name of a colour?[174]

This, then, is a pedagogical work, an exercise made, as if for students, in the arbitrariness of classifications and power relations. It is critically self-reflexive, for the jibe about 'practical anachronism' is also directed at Art & Language themselves. The result is a reduced, playful

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[174] Michael Baldwin/ Charles Harrison/ Mel Ramsden, *Art & Language in Practice, vol. I: Illustrated Handbook*, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona 1999, p. 199.

but mordant take on the expression of class difference, in which political idealism becomes subject to 'the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration', the order of a new professional class, which harbours no illusions.[175]

Jo Spence & Terry Dennett, 'Colonisation' from *The History Lesson*, 1982

Engaged in further education, and in workshops in working-class communities, Jo Spence and Terry Dennett used the traditional means of photography to highlight its uses, ideology and institutions in what were intended to be 'lessons'. *The History Lesson*, for example, was university-initiated, the result of a commission from MIT in 1982; logically, Spence and Dennett, far from producing fine art editions, made laminated prints for circulation in educational settings, and their work was intended to provoke discussion.[176] This was an attempt to make photographic theory more accessible, and to sidestep the marginalisation of such work in professional art or political magazines.[177] The intent was to uncover through psychoanalysis and historical materialism what had been hidden or made invisible.[178] While the results were a good deal easier to understand than the works of Art & Language, this

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[175] The quoted passage is from Benjamin Buchloh's justly renowned essay, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, no. 55, Winter 1990, p. 142.

[176] Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, 'Remodelling Photo-History', in Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, ed. Jo Stanley, Routledge, London 1995, p. 77.

[177] Spence/ Dennett, p. 78.

[178] Spence/ Dennett, pp. 84-5.

work was equally unembarrassed by serious intellectual engagement and exploration. Its products were often funny as well as informative: in 'Colonisation' (one part of *The History Lesson*), Spence and Dennett stage a telling condensation of class, gender and imperial themes, in their mock recreation of a truly overt and exploitative ethnography of the working-class woman, and of:

> her right to exhibit herself as a 47-year-old social actor, in daring to offer some very different renderings of the female body from those, say, in women's magazines. In that particular homogenized and declassed world, where everything is idealized.... women are enjoined to identify with the universalizing effects of photographic styles in fashion and advertising which minimize skin texture and colour, disguise sagging flesh and flabby, tired or diseased bodies, and efface the ageing process.[179]

It was, for its time, a startling Brechtian form of consciousness raising, which relied on a number of fragile factors: Spence's own personal bravery in displaying her body, particularly during her treatment for cancer; the rising wealth and social mobility of the working class; and the formation of an environment of sustained leftist thinking, unattached to the existing Communist states.

Gilbert & George, *Class War Militant Gateway*, 1986

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[179] Spence/ Dennett, p. 86.

Labour administrations had, since the reforms of the immediate postwar period, been content to rely on rising living standards to pacify its supporters, and had attempted no deeper transformation of what remained a deeply divided society. McKibbin puts the matter plainly: because the social-democratic definition of democracy had not entrenched itself in civil society, the political settlement of 1945 depended on the survival of the industrial working class.[180] A party with the will to face the social effects of demolishing that class as an organised force could dismantle it. In 1976 James Callaghan led the switch to a tight money policy which anticipated the position of the later Tory regime. It could not save his government, and Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979, committed to driving down state spending, and basing her political support on an appeal to sectors of the working class, particularly the self-employed and those who aspired to home ownership.[181]

The shift was a profound one. Maurice Cowling wrote of Baldwin and his Conservative Party that they shared many fundamental values with their Labour opponents:

> There was the same affectation of dislike for the millionaire press. There was the same distaste for the ostentation of wealth. There was the same concern with decency and virtue and a belief … that the rich had a duty to be kind to the poor.[182]

It is evident how far Thatcherism departed from those attitudes, in the courting of the Murdoch media empire, the crowing about the mid 1980s 'economic miracle' which benefited the wealthiest, and the infamous statements by Tebbit and others about the unemployed. Stuart Hall, in writing of the 'regressive modernisation' of the Thatcherite project argued that it was fixed on the unfinished character of British bourgeois transformation, arguing that it had never completed the capitalist project, and thus remained bound to the tradition.[183] It forged from contradictory elements of apparent cultural conservatism (the return to 'Victorian values') a powerful new hegemony.[184]

Geoffrey Wheatcroft, in his book *The Strange Death of Tory England*, shows that there was a significant shift in the class leadership of the Conservative Party, from (put crudely) aristocratic and gentlemanly to petit-bourgeois. From the traditional Tory point of view, Thatcher and her ilk were not Tories. He examines the previous Left credentials of some of her key supporters—of Hugh Thomas who had written a history of the Spanish Civil War; of Alfred Sherman who had served in the International Brigade, of Paul Johnson, who had edited the *New Statesman*, commenting that in this shift from the left, 'they became right-wingers but not Tories'.[185] That, put otherwise, they were not attached to the old ideals of stability, managed change and attachment to tradition.

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[180] McKibbin, p. 536.
[181] Lloyd, p. 416.
[182] Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920-1924: The Beginning of Modern British Politics*, Cambridge University Press, London 1971, p. 427; cited in Wiener, p. 101.
[183] Stuart Hall, 'Postscript: Gramsci and Us', in Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1991, p. 118. See also Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, Verso, London 1988.
[184] This combination of radicalism masked by conservatism is analysed brilliantly by Raphael Samuel, 'Mrs Thatcher and Victorian Values', in *Theatres of Memory. Volume II: Island Stories: Unravelling Britain*, ed. Alison Light, Verso, London 1998.
[185] Wheatcroft, pp. 154-5.

It was not that Thatcher did not have her cultural admirers though, for her petit-bourgeois philistinism, she gained the undying hatred of the cultural elite. Those admirers were of a predictable class outlook: Philip Larkin, it emerged after his death in the publication of letters and diaries, had been an adoring fan.[186] Gilbert & George have been public admirers, with George stating that Thatcher made a 'revolution in England' in getting people not to rely on the state; indeed, he recommended a wholesale privatisation of the state.[187]

Thatcher's vision was a natural fit with Gilbert & George's in many ways. They complained about the obscurity of much contemporary art and the 'nationalisation' of artists. She grapsed the appeal of ignoring intellectual opinion to speak to 'common sense', attacking art subsidy on the grounds that it was a net payment made from the poor to the rich.[188] That commonsense ground was the place where skilled working-class and petit-bourgeois white attitudes overlapped. Her own lack of interest in the arts was true to her lower-middle class origins (and those she most needed to appeal to).[189]

For Gilbert: 'Socialism wants everybody to be equal. We want to be different,'[190] and this is a familiar return to the principled individuality of the autonomous artist. Gilbert & George's conservatism is in provocative juxtaposition with their flaunting of gay sexuality and their oft-repeated obscenities. They gesture towards issues of race, class, sexuality and empire but only to harness these hot cultural issues to their evolved and readily recognisable brand.

> Our art is as English as England is anyway global. If you want to live in the world this is the place. It's the only place where you have a total grasp of the whole world. Whatever is happening in every country you can feel it in London.[191]

Their massive triptych, *Class War Militant Gateway*, each section of which is over 3m high and 10m long, was made in the immediate wake of the Miners' Strike, in which the power of the British union movement was broken. The works include red flowers, fey half-naked workers brandishing red poles, the artists themselves naturally, views of London and ill-defined work places. They march, says Gilbert, to take over the city; George adds 'The city as a direct extension, like the individual'. Further, George says of the stooped figures crouching behind the flowers in 'Gateway': 'People weighed down by their burden, not walking straight. We like that contrast.'[192] Read in order, the workers march, stop still, then stoop before the towering figures of the artists. While Lewis admired and feared the muscular, mechanical strength of the masses, here it is their feminised weakness and pliability that is found attractive, though the end result of submission to the authority of the elite is the same.

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[186] Wheatcroft, p. 155. Note though the defence of his legacy in the light of these revelations by Christopher Hitchens, 'Something about the Poems: Larkin and "Sensitivity"', *New Left Review*, no. 200, July-August 1993, pp. 161-72.

[187] Jonquet, pp. 312-3.

[188] This point is made by Wheatcroft, p. 160.

[189] Wheatcroft, p. 161.

[190] Jonquet, p. 312.

[191] Robert Rosenblum, *Introducing Gilbert & George*, Thames & Hudson, London 2004, p. 119. Quote from 1981.

[192] Jonquet, p. 131.

Thatcher laid waste British heavy industry, and with it the basis of unionised power. Direct comments on this historical development in the art world were, it should be no surprise, rare, although Michael Landy made a large installation, *Scrapheap Services*, which put the matter plainly: mannequins are posed as if in the process of sweeping up thousands of laboriously made tin figures, cut from drink cans and bearing their brands. The figures were defined by their consumption but, as wages ceased, they were refigured as trash—mere packaging. The mannequins act as agents of a mock corporation that cleanses the human detritus of deindustrialisation to create a sanitised rural environment.

Thatcher did much to dispose of the anti-entrepreneurial spirit of the middle class, and the fundamentals of her vision (particularly the attachment to privatisation and the unquestioning support of US imperialism) were confirmed in the regime of her admirer, Blair. While under Thatcher these developments were masked with conservative cultural talk, under Blair they are out in the open: no tradition should stand in the way of global competitiveness, of the free play of the market.

Michael Landy, *Scrapheap Services*, 1995, Tate

It was not only working-class cultures that were destroyed. The abandonment of the old conservative values did much to further a decline in bourgeois mores. For Wheatcroft, the bases of Tory power—hunting, the Church of England and the armed forces—were all launched into decline. By the end of the 1980s, claims Wheatcroft, all these features of English life were not merely declining but were in many circles despised.[193] To this undermining of the basis of Conservatism, we may add the loss of Empire, and the noxious question of Europe.[194]
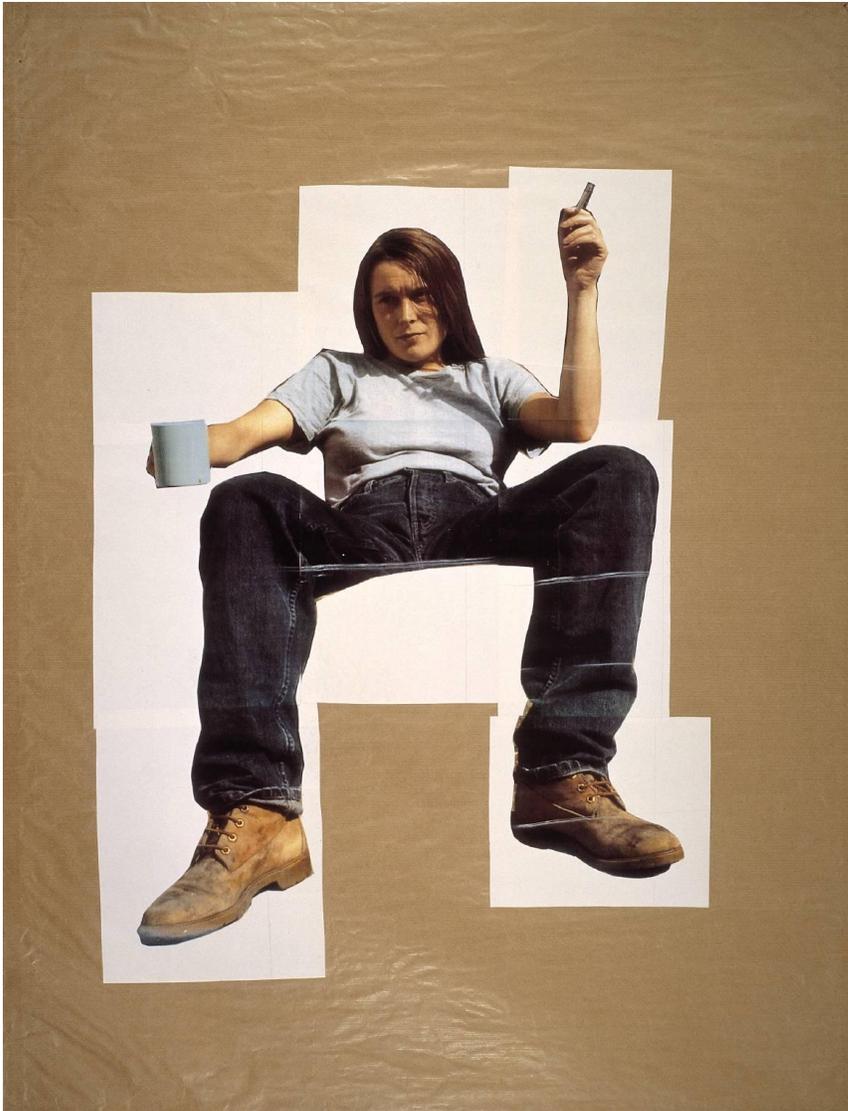
Sarah Lucas, *Self Portrait with Mug of Tea*, 1993

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[193] Wheatcroft, p. 272.

[194] See Susan Watkins' review of Wheatcroft: 'Toryism After Blair', *New Left Review*, new series, no. 38, March-April 2006, pp. 128-35. While Major was still in power, the journal also published a prescient analysis of the deep structural problems facing the Conservatives: Andrew Gamble, 'The Crisis of Conservatism', *New Left Review*, no. 214, November-December 1995, pp. 3-25.

Some indication of the change may be registered in the work of Sarah Lucas. She poses repeatedly as a proletarian character, tough, masculine, overtly sexual and confrontational. In *Self Portrait with Mug of Tea*, the fag gives the viewer the finger, while the picture is centred on Lucas' crotch. That she does this in the period shortly after the working class as a serious political force had been defeated gives the image a conservatively elegiac air. Its most identifiable characteristics of clothing, pose and behaviour are transposed into art work for the faint nostalgic and provocative spark that they still retain. While this practice of role-playing owes something to Spence, it is the opposite of Brechtian. Here ready-made identities are played out in pantomime transposition, and the old middle-class hostility to workers (now displaced onto the inconvenient detritus, 'chavs' and such like) is replayed as retro entertainment. Furthermore, Lucas does not only appear as a working-class type but as a celebrity artist whose work may be seen as a concerted, large-scale branding and publicity exercise for 'Sarah Lucas'. In this, of course, she is far from alone (we may compare, with their differing class affiliations, the brands Emin, Hirst and Turk) who play in the fields of celebrity, along with the Windsors.

Yet there is a more serious point here. Professionalisation, in Perkin's sense, is under threat, as the insecurity that has long been a feature of working-class life creeps higher up the social hierarchy. Public-sector professionals are increasingly governed with managerial tools that ensure that market models are adhered to.[195] Short-term contracts, and wages with large performance components undermine the salary culture. This condition is compounded by the severe democratic deficit, with greater centralisation of power, a more presidential form of government, and the decreasing distance between the main parties. If at the beginning of this period, Britain first attained its full status as a democracy, at its end that status is open to doubt.[196]

As the political establishment decided that it would be a good idea to forget about social stratification, Martin Parr produced a book, *Think of England*, in which the classes merge in displays of colourful vulgarity and social stereotyping. Parr's book may be seen as a reply to Brandt's. Again, this work is governed by a fascination with prejudicial cliché: it imparts a vision of a mostly white (or, on the beach, pink) middle England in which objects and people conspire to confirm received ideas—where breakfasts are always greasy, the upper class (or those who dress as such) haughtily quaff champagne and chase foxes, while the lower orders flaunt their invariably broiled and hairy backs, heavy gold jewellery and cemented make-up. Parr's describes himself as having 'a perfect middle-class pedigree', and this shows in the book's relative downplaying of the middle class (just as in Brandt) in favour of the entertaining extremes of the class spectrum.[197]

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[195] See Perkin, pp. xvi-xvii.

[196] See Peter Mair, 'Ruling the Void? The Hollowing of Western Democracy', *New Left Review*, second series, no. 42, November-December 2006, pp. 25-51.

[197] In an interview with Rick Poynter, *Twice* magazine, Summer 2001; cited in Val Williams, *Martin Parr*, Phaidon Press, London 2002, p. 275.

Martin Parr, *Think of England*, 2000, cover

The cover of *Think of England* is a riposte to Robert Frank's famous photograph *Parade, Hoboken*, in which social alienation is strongly represented by the separation of the figures and the masking of one by the US flag. Parr swapped the traditional black and white of documentary for garish colour in the 1980s, and while the narrow band of focus blurs all but the hanging flags, there is a suggestion here that there is nothing to hide, and no suppression of subjectivity by dumb patriotism, but rather the contented, colourful flaunting of settled class identities beneath the Union Jack.

Robert Frank, *Parade, Hoboken, NJ*, 1955

Class in Britain has certainly not disappeared, and part of the utility of Parr's work is to remind viewers of its continuing theatrical visibility. Rather, polarisation has increased, as much of the working class has been reduced to precarious insecurity, and a layer of the population remain out of official work and unassimilated into the civil realm. As insecurity grows and widens, the basis on which art rested throughout the twentieth century—of professionalisation and transcendent autonomy—erodes.

Ian Hinchliffe, performance at 'Woodwork', Vauxhall Spring Gardens, London 1993

That the vision of classless society remains an illusion is proved by the thoroughly unassimilable character of class-conscious art, especially that which expresses class antagonism. The performance artist, Ian Hinchliffe, a veteran of the scene for over thirty years, continues to hold forth from a peculiar niche: he is manifestly working-class, a learned, articulate but foul-mouthed drunkard. This combination breaks with the usual class clichés, and thus puts middle-class viewers in an unaccustomed place—the same place that Gramsci willingly put himself in times of fuller possibility: as a pupil of the workers.[198] Hinchliffe's bad behaviour is accompanied by a great range of historical and cultural references (unlike the successfully entertaining and thoroughly convenient model of Tracey Emin, the class primitive, an Alfred Wallis for the 1990s). At 'Woodwork', an art event held Vauxhall Spring Gardens, he resurrected the eighteenth-century compere of the pleasure gardens, Mr Simpson, to orate among plaster torsos memorialising the history of the rise of middle-class culture and the governance of art by the state.[199] His class rancour is unconcealed (no one present at the launch of a book in which he was involved will forget his clattering up the stairs of the ICA on crutches—he had been recently mugged—railing in full throat against the 'Hampstead cunts' that run the place); and the art world deals with him (in the ICA incident, at least) by calling the police. What Hinchliffe's long career, unblemished by honours or commercial success, points to is the unutterable in the nexus of class and contemporary art.[200] This area of deep obscurity is built into the very structure of art. As Caudwell understood, the main role of art is to assure the middle class professional of his or her own autonomy, freedom and lack of determination by social and economic forces. For as long as that basic structure holds, the pressure from below of the undifferentiated and collective mass must be inimical to it. Yet the forces set in train in the destruction of working-class power and much middle-class professional privilege will bear with them long and deep consequences. As even the Gulf Stream that Lewis railed against falters as the sea grows less salty, British class relations, and the art that they have fostered, may further lose their mildness.

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[198] See the introduction to Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and OtherWritings*, trans.Louis Marks, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1957, p. 15.

[199] For an account of 'Woodwork', see Julian Stallabrass, 'A Place of Pleasure: *Woodwork*, Vauxhall Spring Gardens and Making Audiences for Art', in Duncan McCorquodale/ Naomi Siderfin/ Julian Stallabrass, eds., *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art*, Black Dog Publishing, London 1998, pp. 170-207.

[200] There is naturally little literature on Hinchliffe. The artist-run space Beaconsfield showed a retrospective of his work in 1998: *Estate: The Ian Hinchliffe Retrospective*, London 1998.