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Classes and Cultures: A Postscript

My book *Classes and Cultures* had a complicated history. It was originally intended as a volume in the New Oxford History of England – and is thus a study of England, not Britain – and would have followed what was prescribed for such a volume: a book which required, *inter alia*, explicitly political, indeed, high political, chapters. In the end, my volume was withdrawn from the series, and *Classes and Cultures* emerged as a book with little that was specifically or conventionally political. This omission was deliberate. But *Classes and Cultures* was intended to be political: I argued that it was 'probably more a book about the social and ideological foundations of English politics than anything else', as was recognized by at least two of the reviewers.[1] I was, however, conscious that the politics might be too implicit, that the reader had to do too much work. I tried, therefore, to make the argument explicit in the conclusion. This was insufficient for some reviewers. Susan Pedersen thought that, as a tactic, it was misconceived. She 'regretted' my decision to write the book in this manner, and suggested that the argument was so implicit as to be sometimes 'largely asides'.[2] John Callaghan also thought the tactic unwise: a 'mass of interesting detail' was 'sandwiched' between a political introduction and political conclusion and not, by implication, organically related to them.[3]

I could not be expected to agree wholly with such criticism but I concede the truth of some of it, and was always aware that wedging the 'interesting detail' could lead to problems. Furthermore, it led to one conclusion – about the significance of the second world war – which I now think to be wrong. Here I would like to make explicit – to the extent that I can – the political argument of *Classes and Cultures*, even if this in some ways is simply to recapitulate much of the book, and to suggest where the argument now needs modification. I should acknowledge at the outset the methodological difficulties of establishing political connections between 'formal' or 'high' politics, and their necessarily contingent nature, with the complex and slow-moving social relationships within which politics operates. This is also a problem with any book which is largely thematic and, in this case, with a wide range. Not everything 'fits'. Nor can everything be explained by the same thing – except in the loosest and most unhelpful sense; as, for instance, by 'capitalism' – in part because people's lives are usually so fragmented. Nevertheless, *Classes and Cultures* is not wholly thematic. I was careful to place people's social and cultural experience within a chronology.

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[1] See S. Collini, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 April 1998; R.W. Johnson, *London Review of Books*, 21 May, 1998.

[2] S. Pedersen, *Journal of Modern History*, 72, 1 (March 2000), 202–204.

[3] J. Callaghan, 'Ross MacKibbin and the British Working Class: Labour without Socialism' in: J. Callaghan, S. Fielding and S. Ludlam (eds), **Approaches to Laboor: Studies on the Labour Party and Labour History** (Manchester, 2003, forthcomming).

Even so, it can be difficult to combine 'structures' and 'events'. The first does not always determine the second.

Classes and Cultures is a study of a democratic society.[4] It is a study, however, not merely of competing definitions of democracy, but (I would argue) of a flawed democracy. After 1918 there were evolving in England two historically conceivable but alternative forms of democracy: a 'bourgeois' one based upon a self-confident middle class, or a social democracy based upon a self-confident working class. For different reasons both were frustrated; though both came close to success. What emerged was a form of democracy possessing a high degree of legitimacy but which compartmentalised people, more or less rigidly, into social classes between which there was almost no commonality of social or cultural experience. Furthermore, even as England became formally more democratic, in some spheres – in *Classes and Cultures* I cited education and sport as examples – the social distances widened rather than narrowed. Social class is central to the explanatory apparatus of *Classes and Cultures*, and the argument depends upon a study of the upper, middle and working classes as distinct classes. The chapters on the different classes have both a thematic and chronological basis. But I also attempted to explore class relationships via a study of what I regard as 'representative cultures': education, religion, sexual morality, sport, the cinema, radio and language. These chapters are primarily thematic.

Classes and Cultures is thus not wholly a static analysis, but its chronological boundaries are not derived from official party-politics. Were that so, the years 1931 and 1940 would have been pivotal. They are, of course, years in which governments fell after real crises within the political system. In 1931 the second Labour government was succeeded by a 'National' government dominated by the Conservatives. In 1940 this same government was replaced by another coalition in which the Conservatives were notionally predominant, but which in fact depended for its viability upon its Labour members. In party terms the two dates were climacteric: the first established the remarkable hegemony of the Conservatives in the 1930s, which was still unshaken at the outbreak of the second world war; the second abruptly destroyed that hegemony and made possible Labour's victory at the 1945 elections. Yet these two dates do not have the same significance. In *Classes and Cultures* I argued that the 1920s and 1930s were socially and politically very different decades, and the reason for this, I suggested, was the profound change in the composition of the middle class between one decade and the other. The 1931 political crisis, therefore, arguably represented a wider social reality – that the Conservative Party's electoral domination was based not just upon political contingency, the 'events' of 1931, but also upon major social changes which inherently favoured it, but to which it had, nonetheless, to adapt. Nineteen-forty, however, stood for nothing like that. England's class structure, indeed the composition of the working class itself, no more favoured Labour in 1945 than it did in 1935, or 1931. One politically pivotal date, 1931, thus emerges more or less naturally from the argument of *Classes and Cultures*, but the second, 1940, does not. There is no obvious explanation (even implicit) within *Classes and Cultures* as to why 1940 should have been pivotal. If I were to 'rewrite' *Classes and Cultures* as an explicitly political book, I now think that my treatment of the 1920s would have to go further; that my treatment of the 1930s stands up well; but that my account of what happened in the 1940s, particularly to working-class opinion, needs substantial revision.

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[4] The original title of the book had as a sub-title: 'A Study of a Democratic Society'.

In *Classes and Cultures* I pointed out that the English middle class of the 1920s was essentially Edwardian, both in its occupational structure and as a proportion of the population. Here the census data is unambiguous.[5] I had also noted, and this was an 'aside', that in the 1920s the political parties found it difficult to free themselves from Edwardian modes of thought. In retrospect, I think I should have made more of this. Class structure, ideology and the First World War all combined, I would argue, to prolong Edwardian politics well into the 1920s. But the politics were Edwardian in a particular way. They realised, so to speak, the worst fears of the Edwardian middle class. An important element – though certainly not the only one – in late-Victorian and Edwardian political rhetoric and literature was a sense that bourgeois society was living on the edge, that below the bourgeoisie, in the lower depths, was a proletariat waiting to inundate them and their conventions. But so it was in the rhetoric and literature of the 1920s, especially the early 1920s. Warwick Deeping's novel, *Sorrel and Son*, which I have cited as the epitome of such literature,[6] was not wholly dissimilar from the Edwardian novel of decline and imperial crisis. As an example of this similarity, we could compare what C.F.G. Masterman said about the mood of the middle class in 1909 with what he said in 1920. In 1909 he wrote

> The rich despise the working people; the Middle Classes fear them. Fear … is the motive power behind each successive uprising. In feverish hordes, the suburbs swarm to the polling booth to vote against a truculent Proletariat. The Middle Class elector is becoming irritated and indignant against working-class legislation. He is growing tired of the plaint of the unemployed and the insistent crying of the poor. The spectacle of a Labour Party triumphant in the House of Commons … fills him with profound disgust … He has difficulty with the plumber in jerry-built houses needing continuous patching and mending. His wife is harassed by the indifference or insolence of the domestic servant. From a blend of these two he has constructed in imagination the image of Democracy – a loud-voiced, independent, arrogant figure, with a thirst for drink, and imperfect standards of decency, and a determination to be supported at some one else's expense … He gazes darkly from his pleasant hill villa upon the huge and smoky area of tumbled tenements which stretches at his feet … Every hour he anticipates the boiling over of the cauldron.[7]

In 1920 he described the attitudes of the same class as follows:

> Richford [a middle-class suburb] hates and despises the working classes … partly because it has contempt for them, and partly because it has fear of them … Just on its borders, and always prepared seemingly to engulf it, are those great masses of humanity which accept none of its standards, and maintain life on a totally different plane … Labour only enters

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[5] R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 46–47.

[6] R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class* (Oxford, 1990), 272–273.

[7] C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London, 1909), 71–72.

> its kingdom as a coal supply rendered ever more limited and expensive by the insatiable demand of coal-miners to work short hours for immense wages; or as the increase of its necessary season-ticket to 'town' owing to the demand of the railway workers for higher pay; or as the plumber, who is unable to mend its jerry-built houses; or the bricklayer who refuses to build any alternatives. It can walk but a few yards and it is in, say, Hoxditch [a working-class suburb], where all the inhabitants are dingy and all the houses drab and over-crowded with swarms of discoloured children: and the public houses flare at every corner: and it realises that this is the 'Labour' against which it is warned by all the supporters of things as they are.[8]

These two passages are remarkably alike – almost word for word. There could well be an element of autobiography in the second of these quotations:[9] what he says of England in 1920, however, is supported by all too much other evidence. But it is not only his accounts of the pre- and post-war middle class which are remarkably alike, so is his description of everything else. The post-war profiteers, for instance, are simply the Edwardian plutocrats (the 'conquerors') in a new guise. Nor has the working class changed its face. Accurate or inaccurate, Masterman's post-war version attests to the durability of Edwardian political categories. If accurate as description, then the First World War has changed nothing. If, however, Masterman was incapable of devising new political categories – that is to say, he saw what he saw in 1909 and 1920 via the same rhetorical conventions – then again the war has changed nothing, since people could find no ideological way of expressing change even if it had occurred. But Masterman conceded that the war had changed something. Before the war, he argued, the position of the 'ordinary' middle class was precarious, during the war itself it was 'one of anxious suspense', after the war 'impossible'. The war had, therefore, made things worse: it turned possible decay into actual decay. This argument, I think, has truth, but is overstated. The position of the middle class before 1914 was better than precarious, and the pre-1914 Liberal government was anxious that it remained so. That government was, indeed, very successful in preserving the balance of Edwardian society, in constraining the potential for serious social conflict which was undoubtedly there. It was assisted by the comparative passivity of the middle class. The great strikes of 1911–1913, for instance, looked very like those of the twenties, as did the alarm which they excited. But few were then ready to act as strike-breakers, to ensure that the sinews of the nation did not wither.

The war destroyed this balance in two ways: its immediate effect, first, was to strengthen almost the whole of the working class at the expense of much (though not all) of the middle class and, through inflation, to undermine middle class income and the style of life which it usually permitted. Second, it 'militarised' the mentality of middle-class men, made them more aggressive towards the working class. The war always mattered more to the upper and middle classes than to the working class. This was so, not only because they were more 'patriotic' and readier to volunteer, though they were, but because they were more dispensable. A significantly higher proportion of the upper and middle classes served in the forces than did the working class since a significantly lower proportion of the middle and upper classes worked in reserved occupations. War makes men war-like and the readiness of the middle class to act as strikebreakers from the moment the war ended was surely in part a result of the ordeal by fire that many experienced in the trenches – an ordeal not erased by the knowledge that while they were there skilled munitions workers were, as it seemed, striking (yet again) for higher wages and further privileges. Nor did those men doubt that the war they fought was a just war. Such 'militarisation' was apparent in the language of the general strike: men 'volunteered' or were 'called up' for national service. Many institutions, like my own College, routinely used the vocabulary of 'national service'.[10]

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[8] C.F.G. Masterman, *England After War* (London, 1920), 54–55.

[9] Masterman, having lost his government post at the end of the war, and no longer an MP, had no fixed income, other than his journalism. His wife later wrote: 'I think these three years, 1921–1922–1923, were the hardest we had … Costs of living were still high and above all the uncertainty and unevenness of earning harrassed him'. *England After War* was meant to be a 'sequel' to *The Condition of England*: the chapter on the middle classes in the former 'picked up the theme' of the same chapter in the latter. (L. Masterman, *C.F.G. Masterman* (London, 1939), 318–327.)

By destroying this balance the war unleashed the demons of Edwardian society. Social conflict was much intensified after the war but within an Edwardian system of class relations and conducted through an Edwardian political rhetoric. This does not mean that the war merely accelerated the pace of Edwardian politics: that would imply there was a demonstrable 'crisis' in the offing which the war hastened. Possibly there was; but we certainly cannot prove it. Nor do we need to. If this argument – that the war destroyed the political balance of Edwardian society but not its class system or rhetorical conventions – is correct then the problem is largely resolved. The war really did matter; not, however, because it introduced a new era but because it upset the ballast which kept Edwardian politics on an even keel. The most obvious manifestation of this, of course, was the emergence of the Labour Party as the principal party of the left, since the demons of Edwardian society could remain tethered only so long as the Labour Party was subordinated to the Liberals within the 'party of progress'. And the 'progressive' majority existed only as long as that was so. Once it ceased to be true, as it did after 1918, the 'progressive' majority disappeared since, if obliged to choose between them, as increasingly they were, most Liberals preferred the Conservative Party to Labour.

This analysis of English politics in the 1920s is both implicit and explicit in *Classes and Cultures*. We could, however, carry the political argument further. If we admit that the politics of the 1920s were essentially Edwardian we can see why the two most serious attempts to break with the Edwardian political settlement were unsuccessful. In 1922 the proposed continuation of the coalition government, which would have represented a de facto fusion of the Conservative Party and much of the Liberal Party, which was within the logic of post-war anti-socialism, and which was supported both by Lloyd George and most of the Conservative leadership, failed. And in 1923 Baldwin's attempt to secure electoral support for the abandonment of free trade, a doctrine central to Edwardian politics, also failed – as Conservative attempts to abandon it before 1914 had failed. Only in the destruction of Edwardian progressivism (as we have seen) did the politics of the 1920s differ significantly from 1914.[11]

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[10] See, for instance, St John's College Archives, File Box B, No. 87, Bay CC.

Yet the disappearance of the great 'Party of Progress', the tacit alliance of the Liberal and Labour Parties in parliament, was no insignificant event. The fusion of the non-Labour parties and the adoption of protection as a counter-weight to socialism would seem natural corollaries to that event, and would certainly have matched the mood of much of the middle class as it is described in *Classes and Cultures.*[12] Why did they not happen? The answer lies in the persistence into the 1920s of the social networks which underpinned Edwardian Conservatism and Liberalism. The membership of the Conservative Party, as Jonathan Bates has argued,[13] remained remarkably unreconstructed: ageing men (and women), drawn largely from the Edwardian upper middle class, often of imperial and military provenance, with long memories and scores to settle. They maintained a much-cherished dislike of the Liberal Party and its predominantly nonconformist social networks. The reverse was also true: many people were still temperance and Masterman's 'flaring public houses' as much favoured the Conservative as the Labour Party. Conservatism's alcoholic and church-and-king traditions still alienated many who were otherwise sympathetic to its anti-socialism. Political nonconformity, though decaying, was still strong enough to sustain a residual Liberalism.

The failure of the Conservative Party to persuade the electorate to abandon free trade – even though it had been modified during and immediately after the first world war – and the fact that both the Liberal and Labour Parties remained wedded to it confirms the extent to which Edwardian ideologies survived into the post-war world. The Conservative victory in the 1924 general election was possible largely because Baldwin accepted that protection, unlike anti-Bolshevism, was still unacceptable to the electorate. The 1924 elections were, as a result, a contest between free-trade anti-socialism and free-trade socialism with free-trade Liberalism struggling to remain in the game. The 1920s were, therefore, a kind of political souvenir, a mutilated and uncreative form of Edwardian politics: three parties were forced to operate within a free-trade economic system in which the largest of these parties had virtually no belief, and within an electoral system bereft of the 'progressivism' which had given that system coherence before 1914 and had animated free-trade Liberalism.

In the 1930s, however, this form of politics, decaying, but still alive, finally collapsed. Why? In *Classes and Cultures* I argued that the Conservative electoral hegemony in the 1930s would have been impossible but for two things. The first was the remarkable change in the composition of the middle class. This began in the late 1920s and accelerated throughout the 1930s. Not only did the middle class grow in size, it was markedly more technical, commercial and scientific.[14] It became much more an employed than a self-employed class, and an increasing proportion were employed by the state. The Edwardian middle class was predominantly professional and clerical and was, I would argue, much more susceptible to the class-war anti-socialism incipient in the Edwardian period, and fully-formed in the years immediately after the first world war, than was its successor in the 1930s.

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[11] It could be argued that the settlement of the Irish issue via partition in 1922 represents another break with Edwardian politics. It did represent a break, but I would argue that the settlement had little effect within England itself. It is hard to show that the Irish question meant much at all to the English after 1918 – one way or the other.

[12] For the origins of Baldwin's protectionist campaign in 1923, see R. Self, 'Conservative Reunion and the General Election of 1923', *Twentieth Century British History,* 3, 3 (1992); and N. Smart, 'Baldwin's Blunder? The General Election of 1923', and rejoinder by R. Self, *Twentieth Century British History,* 7, 1 (1996).

[13] J.W.B. Bates, 'The Conservative Party in the Constituencies, 1918–1939', unpublished Oxford D. Phil thesis (1994), 113–149.

The second, I argued in *Classes and Cultures* – at some length[15] – lay in the basis of 1930s Conservatism: a form of secular bourgeois sociability which allowed formally hostile or mutually indifferent Liberal and Conservative social networks (which often meant nonconformist and Anglican) to meet in notionally unpolitical surroundings, but surroundings which actually meant anti-socialist and Conservative. It was in these institutions that the definition of Conservatism as 'non-political' emerged – as opposed to the Labour Party which was always 'political' – and it was they which turned local government in much of the country into a species of one-party politics. Throughout the 1930s there was an unprecedented growth in such institutions: masonic lodges, Rotary, chambers of commerce, the Elks etc, and the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were to be their apogee. That several of these institutions were American in origin is also significant. It points to the existence in England of a partially Americanised business-professional individualism and the possibility of an Americanised individualist democracy. The Conservatives had, however, to adjust to this new world, much of it nonconformist in origin: they did not simply inherit it. The Conservative Party of the 1930s was thus not Edwardian. It was more restrained, better-mannered, more straight-laced, less imperial, more overtly middle-class. Because of this, furthermore, and its associated 'common sense', it became increasingly attractive not just to the masons but to women voters – who were often excluded from the sociability of the lodges or Rotary. Baldwin's importance in the history of the Conservative Party is that he presided over and gave a public face to this transition with such skill.[16]

What I did not – and could not – discuss in *Classes and Cultures* was the role of the 1931 political crisis in promoting the Conservative party's electoral domination of the 1930s. We could argue (though I would not) that the changes in the composition of the middle class and the emergence of a non-political sociability might have counted for little but for 1931. My guess is that the Conservatives in office – that is, had they won the 1929 elections – would not have been overwhelmed by events as Labour was. Indeed, they might have exploited circumstances, as they did in opposition. Whatever we conclude, however, the fall of the second Labour government and the formation of the National Government in 1931 has unquestionable political significance. The economic and political crisis of 1929-1931 finally destroyed what remained of Edwardian politics. The attempt to preserve a free-trade economy, around which so much of 1920s politics revolved, was abandoned. This in turn meant the end of free-trade Liberalism as an effective force and, as important, the end of free-trade socialism, hitherto the dominant form of British socialism. Protection, a political heresy before 1914, was enthroned after 1931 and now largely uncontested by Labour.

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[14] McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 46–48

[15] Ibid., 88–98.

[16] The best discussion of Baldwin as a 'democratic' political leader is P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: conservative leadership and national values* (Cambridge, 1999), 203–242 especially.

The crisis was especially favourable for the Conservative Party – apart from the undoubted advantage the Conservatives had of being in opposition when it occurred. It was the only party which appeared to have a viable policy in the circumstances,[17] while the collapse of the Labour government, and the way it collapsed, made possible that anti-socialist regrouping under Conservative domination which had narrowly eluded them in the 1920s. The Conservatives did not so much fuse with the Liberal Party as appropriate most of its voters. The Conservatism which emerged from the crisis, protectionist and anti-socialist, could have been reactionary. But that might have alienated those Liberals who followed Sir John Simon into the 'National' fold. Furthermore, the defeat of Labour in the 1931 elections was so unambiguous as to make the strident anti-socialism of the 1920s almost redundant. The Conservatism of the 1930s, therefore, was a kind of liberal-conservatism, cautiously progressive in social policy, not hostile to individual working men and women or many of their institutions, but hostile to a political conception of the working class – and obliged to be hostile. It represented a social coalition whose core was a post-Edwardian middle class, and which was strikingly successful at both marginalising the Labour Party and obstructing the recovery of free-trade Liberalism.[18] There was no sign that its hegemony was under serious threat before 1939.

Yet that hegemony collapsed in 1940 with a speed no-one could have predicted. In *Classes and Cultures* I tried to explain this in a short essay incorporated into the Conclusion. This essay I now think to be unsatisfactory. It is here that the attempt to bolt a discussion of 'events' on to an essentially structural analysis works least well. And this is partly due to the fact that there is no obvious 'class-structural' explanation for the end of the Conservative hegemony. We can, of course, argue that the second world war itself changed the way much of the working class looked at the world. W.G. Runciman, for example, did so, very persuasively, in what still remains the neatest piece of Second World War historical sociology.[19] During the war there were many manifestations of the new spirit, some of which I noted in *Classes and Cultures*: the open expression of long-held grievances; many inequalities once thought natural and irremovable seemed to become unnatural and very movable; the elites could no longer expect to be heard with the deference they were once used to. I cited a number of reasons for this, and the associated move to the political left: the social and economic revival of the great working-class communities in the North of England; the universalising of working-class culture and the radicalisation of much working-class opinion; the politicization of the population during the war – and not just the working class – which undermined the traditional taboos on the public discussion of politics; the admiration for the Soviet Union; the actions and rhetoric of the state itself.[20] These are familiar arguments: the common currency of historical explanations for the Labour victory in 1945. Yet I was always unhappy with this account: it did not seem to fit the 'facts'. Or rather the fact that all our evidence (admittedly incomplete) suggests that the move to the left occurred very rapidly indeed. It was not something which took place over the course of the war. On the contrary, the Conservatives seem likely to have lost any election held after June 1940.[21] The evidence further suggests – almost *ex hypothesi* – that this was a result of a rapid conversion of voters from Conservative to Labour and almost equally rapid demoralisation within the Conservative Party itself. If that is so, then the explanations we usually adduce for the Labour victory in 1945 – and which I gave in *Classes and Cultures* – are probably irrelevant. They might explain the size of the Labour victory or Labour's ability to sustain its lead until 1945; but they cannot explain why the move to the left happened so fast. That move is the more surprising given the extraordinary strength of the Conservative Party in the 1930s and the absence of any evidence that it was under threat in 1939 or early 1940.

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[17] For this, see A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Oxford, 1991), 272–276.

[18] In *Classes and Cultures* I discussed the problems of the Liberal Party only inferentially and largely in relation to nonconformity and its institutions. More, however, could be said as to why the Liberals lost so much of their vote to the Conservatives in the 1930s. The belief Lloyd George (sometimes) held before 1914 that the future lay between a centre party, the Liberal Party, and a socialist one, Labour, was not foolish, and the ambition of New Liberalism was as much to convert the middle class to a democratic politics as it was to wean the working class from socialism. In some ways the Liberal Party seems a more natural 'fit' as a middle-class party. It looked more obviously middle class than the Conservative Party, and its history from the 1920s until the present suggests that it at least has a niche as a middle-class party. Given this, any explanations for its failure have to be tentative. One obvious answer is that it split in the First World War. But that split was largely healed in the 1920s and need not have been fatal. A second, more plausible answer is that after 1918 it never had sufficient working-class support to give it weight. Here the Conservatives, with a traditionally large working-class electorate, were well-placed. It is also likely that in the historical context of the interwar years the Conservative Party's anti-socialism would always trump whatever the Liberals had to offer. Perhaps the most important reason, however, is the one I offered in *Classes and Cultures*: that the Liberal Party in the country was over-dependent on nonconformist political and social networks, which were undoubtedly a wasting asset.

I think there are two reasons for the speed of the change, of which the first is probably the least significant. That is the outbreak of war itself. The political system created after 1931, it can reasonably be argued, depended for its vitality on Britain's not entering any serious kind of war. Appeasement was the inevitable consequence of this. Given the nature and ambitions of Nazism, however, there was no realistic alternative to war, which is why appeasement was so risky. It could not half succeed; if it failed, it failed absolutely. The course of events from the outbreak of war to the formation of Churchill's coalition in May 1940 was almost inexorable, and there was little room for the Chamberlainite version of liberal conservatism in that government.

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[19] W.G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (Harmondsworth, 1966), 92–93 and *passim.*

[20] McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 528–533.

[21] That is certainly the implication of Paul Addison's argument . See P. Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (Pimlico ed. London, 1994), 103–126 particularly.

The second, and more important, reason for the speed of change is related to the first – and that is the movement of working-class opinion. The Conservative Party's largest single constituency, even though it was a more middle-class party than ever, was working-class: a large mass of voters whose 'objective class position' was probably better served by Labour than by the Conservatives. It was, therefore, essential to Conservative electoral hegemony that these voters remained hostile to Labour as a governing party – even though many were not necessarily hostile to the policies for which Labour stood. Throughout the 1930s (with some assistance from the Labour Party itself) the Conservatives were very successful in doing this. They marginalised Labour by denying it legitimacy; indeed, so ideologically entrenched had they become, such legitimacy was theirs to give or deny. In May 1940 all this collapsed. The fall of the Chamberlain government was not a result of popular hostility: the electorate played no part in it. The formation of the Churchill coalition was a result of a crisis in the political elite, and more particularly within the Conservative Party itself when it became clear that the war could no longer be fought without the participation of the Labour Party in government. And the price the Labour Party demanded for participation was the resignation as prime minister of Neville Chamberlain – together with Baldwin, the personification of modern liberal toryism. The entry of Labour into government immediately gave it legitimacy as a governing party; more than that, the legitimacy was bestowed by the *Conservative Party*. This was at a stroke to undo twenty years' work. The fall of Neville Chamberlain's government also coincided with the German invasion of the low countries and France. In circumstances of possible national defeat the Conservatives were obliged to call upon Labour to save the nation. There could scarcely have been a clearer signal to that rather passive Tory working-class electorate used to taking its cue from the Conservative Party. A significant proportion of working-class voters thus aligned themselves with that part of the working class which already supported Labour. Not all did, of course; many remained loyal to the Conservative Party. Nevertheless, while in 1935 about half the working-class electorate voted Conservative; in 1945 only one-third did so. Furthermore, unlike the significant number of middle-class voters who defected to Labour in 1945 (and often for the same reasons), the loss of working-class voters was permanent.[22] The war thus brought to an end, suddenly and unexpectedly, what seemed to be emerging as England's political future: a semi-individualist democracy based upon an expanding post-Edwardian middle class. A crisis within the political elite led to a radicalised governing coalition, whose establishment in turn rapidly led to a radicalisation of popular opinion. All those things to which we attribute the Labour victory in 1945 were a result of such radicalisation, not a cause of it. And that is why the year 1940 differs from 1931. Nineteen-thirty-one was, in a sense, the culmination of a political process whose origins lie in the previous decade; and it stood for a social process which was to continue indefinitely. Nineteen-forty, however, was not the result of either longer term political or social processes. It was, indeed, the reverse: which is why it sits rather awkwardly in *Classes and Cultures.*

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[22] What happened in England was not without international comparison. Much the same thing happened in Australia, a country whose political culture was as close to England's as anyone else's could be, and for much the same reason. In 1941 a crisis within the conservative parties over the conduct of the war – indeed, whether they could conduct the war – and the defection of crucial elements of their parliamentary support brought the Labor Party to power. That in turn led to a huge and almost immediate turn to the left which was manifested in the general election less than two years later. The difference between Australia and England was that in Australia the conservative parties had already been significantly weakened in the general elections of 1940. (For details of this, see P. Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1939–1941* (Canberra, 1952), 491–523.)

If we accept this argument then most of the explanatory problems associated with the Labour victory of 1945 are resolved.[23] Furthermore, such an argument does fit with the description of the working class I give in *Classes and Cultures* and, more explicitly (and strongly) in an earlier book, *The Ideologies of Class.* There I wrote:

> While it would be wrong to see the working class as passive throughout the war – the Chamberlainite state, after all, gave way because it knew it could not fight the war as it thought it had to be fought without that class – it is clear that much of the working class which voted Labour in 1945 was the creation of the state and not of the labour movement itself.[24]

By this argument, common in slightly different ways to both *The Ideologies of Class* and *Classes and Cultures*, the crucial determinant of working class opinion during the war was the state. It would, of course, be wrong to believe that the state had nothing to work on. The working class was not without public grievances and many workingmen and women shared, I suggested in *Classes and Cultures*, an instinctive Marxist theory of value: that their hard work was the source of all wealth, most of which was then expropriated by the non-working classes.[25] And in highly unionised industry a sense of solidarity could be strong. Yet the tendency was for grievances to be localised, for folk-Marxism to be politically neutral, for political explanation – why does society operate so unequally? – to be personalised rather than systematic, and for political action to be defensive rather than aggressive. The result was that at the outbreak of war in 1939 the Labour vote was 'stuck': the Party held what it had but was apparently making few new recruits. It was the political crisis of May 1940 and the formation of Churchill's coalition which was instrumental in unlocking those new recruits who made possible Labour's victory in 1945.

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[23] There is, of course, another way of resolving the problem, one which emphasises demographic or generational change. A 'generational' explanation inevitably tends to depreciate the significance of conversion as a factor in political change. Such an explanation for Labour's victory in 1945 has been argued most strongly by M. Franklin and M. Ladner ('The Undoing of Winston Churchill', *British Journal of Political Science* (1995)). Most people would agree that there has in England been a tendency for younger voters, particularly young male voters, to support more radical, usually left-wing, parties. And younger cohorts of voters are more 'left-wing' than older cohorts. It is also true that the ten-year gap between the 1935 and 1945 elections meant that the electorate in 1945 was significantly different from that of 1935. I am, nonetheless, unconvinced by their argument. The categories they use to explain demographic-political change, particularly 'socialisation', are much more problematic than they assume, especially as many first-time Labour voters (1945) were 'socialised' not in Labour-voting households but in *Conservative*-voting ones. Nor can we be certain that the unusually large cohort of 1945 would have voted Labour without the experience of war - as Franklin and Ladner are forced to concede: 'It thus remains unclear whether Labour gained more by mobilization or as a result of switching by those who had originally supported another party'. (That is the problem with any such argument: would first-time Labour voters in 1918 have voted Labour without the experience of the first world war?) Furthermore, if the generational explanation is true we would expect those by-elections held between 1935 and 1940 to show some sort of steady movement to Labour. But they show little evidence of such a movement, though it is possible that an increasingly old register concealed that evidence. Everything, including the speed of change, points to conversion: the question is whether conversion was rapid, as I argue here, or occurred more slowly, throughout the course of the second world war.

[24] McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class,* 302.

[25] McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures,* 139–140.

What can we conclude from this analysis? I would argue that the evolution of British politics left England with two incomplete forms of democracy. A middle-class democracy, possibly Americanised, conscious of itself against the old upper and upper middle class, which was more than embryonic in the 1930s, was the first. Such an Americanised democracy – more or less individualist, democratic in manner and attitude – had real attractions to the middle class (as it did to some of the working class) and was, because of the pervasiveness of American cultural influence and the openness of England to American example, always a possibility. But it never emerged, partly because hostility to the Attlee government encouraged much of the middle class to throw in their lot with the old elites; partly because of the inherent defects of American democracy itself; partly because the English social system was in practice too distant from American experience; and partly because of the extreme ambivalence with which the United States was regarded in England both during and after the second world war.[26]

The social democracy of the Attlee government was, however, also incomplete. Its welfare achievements are well-known and beyond anything the Conservatives would have done. Yet it made no attempt to democratise those political or quasi-political institutions of state or society which were ideologically anti-democratic but strongly defended. Indeed, it regarded such reform, to the constitution, to parliament, to the educational system, to the armed forces, for example, as in some way misdirecting the Labour Party from the real interests of its supporters. In this it probably reflected the views of most of those who in England voted for it.[27] Yet in the end such a policy merely reinforced the defensiveness and passivity of much working-class political culture.

Nevertheless, by almost all conventional criteria England was a democracy. The potential for conflict which, I argued in *Classes and Cultures*, was greater than people were prepared to admit,[28] was never fully realised. For that there were three reasons. The first was that the state and its institutions had a degree of legitimacy amongst all social classes sufficient to resist both external and internal shocks, like world war or depression. The second was the fact that a large proportion of the working class supported the Conservative Party. The middle and upper classes never had, therefore, except for the years immediately after the first world war, any reason to think that they had lost control of the state or that it might rule against their fundamental interests. The third, at the level of personal relations, was the development of techniques designed to avoid embarrassment or the giving of offense. Although designed primarily for the middle class and intended to eliminate or diminish social embarrassment, they were adopted by all classes and extended to include anything which might cause political embarrassment.[29] And they also governed personal relations between people of different classes – to the extent that they had contact at all – which took the edge of class differences. Outsiders often found these codes trivialising or enervating, or simply dishonest; yet they did impose constraints upon how far people thought they could go and encouraged a civility in social and political life which few other European societies were then able to emulate.

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[26] Which explains the consistently anti-American tone of the Gallup Polls in the first two years after the war.

[27] The same is not necessarily true, or at least to the same degree, of Labour voters in Scotland and Wales.

[28] McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 50–59.

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[29] See Ibid., 96–98.