

THE RISE OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY

ENGLAND SINCE 1880

Harold Perkin

“A true magnum opus. No social
historian can afford not to read it.”

Asa Briggs

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England since 1800

HAROLD PERKIN



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THE RISE OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY

The long-awaited sequel to the pioneering *The Origins of Modern English Society*, this book is an equally original interpretation of the development of English Society. Stimulating and controversial, it will be widely read by all those who seek an understanding not just of the social and political history of Britain since 1880, but of all mature economies of the world.

The theme is the rise of the 'forgotten middle class', the non-capitalist or professional class which the chief social commentators left out of their analyses. England, like all post-industrial societies, has come to be dominated by growing numbers of 'experts'. Their ideal of how society should be organized has increasingly infiltrated people's minds and found its way into legislation and administration. Unlike the Victorian vision with its emphasis on the entrepreneur and industrial capital, the new ideal is based on trained expertise, selection and reward by merit – in a word, on professionalism. As Harold Perkin shows, a new principle of social organization has emerged, based on rival career hierarchies competing for society's resources, with the keenest competition between those professions becoming ever more dependent on the state – the public sector professions – and those who manage the great expanding corporations – the private sector professions.

Perkin argues that, paradoxically, the resurgence of the free market ideology is not, as it claims to be, a return to Victorian values. It is a reaction by one set of professionals – the private corporate managers and their allies – against the other – the public sector employees – whom the first blame for the elephantiasis of the state and for Britain's economic decline. Perkin concludes that we can and must strive to retain the benefits of professional society without falling into the rival pits – of corporate neo-feudalism and state-centralized authoritarianism – which the extremists on both sides are so busily digging for us.

Social and industrial movements of far-reaching importance are now in progress, and what they portend no living man can say. The immediate responsibility for guiding their development in accordance with the welfare of the nation lies upon those to whom the country has entrusted the conduct of its business. Behind the Government is the unseen but irresistible force of public opinion; it is difficult to ascertain with any degree of precision what this opinion is, but – subject to the exigencies of party politics – the Cabinet will always endeavour to carry out what they believe to be the wishes of the Public. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the power which thus controls national policy, and indirectly the legislation which gives it effect, should be as fully informed as possible about the conditions upon which its opinion and its mandates are based. But our social organisation is now so complicated, and the action and reaction of forces within it so intricate and so difficult to estimate, that public opinion is apt to be formed upon a very incomplete understanding of existing facts.

Sir Arthur Clay, *Syndicalism and Labour* (1911)

PREFACE

Two decades ago I wrote a book that set out to discover *The Origins of Modern English Society* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, Ark, 1985). It found them in the more than Industrial Revolution of 1780-1880, 'a social revolution with social causes and a social process as well as profound social effects', including the demise of the old pre-industrial aristocratic society and the rise of the viable class society of mid-Victorian England. Since all history is a seamless web, it looked forward in the last paragraph, as all unfinished histories should, to the next phase of the story, the decline of Victorian class society and its replacement by the very different society of twentieth-century England. The present book, all too belatedly since most of my teaching, research and publications have fallen in between, is the long-promised sequel to that first one.

I do not regret the delay, for three principal reasons. Firstly, contemporary history, in the sense of history that stops only at the present and is still in large part remembered by people now living, is for obvious reasons the most controversial and lacks the corrective of a tranquil and healing hindsight. It therefore needs more, not less, maturity than the older kind. Secondly, a historian can never have enough experience, and the historian of contemporary society is better qualified, or less unqualified, if he has lived through a considerable part of his period. Teaching grandparents to suck eggs, never a much appreciated endeavour, is even less appreciated when done by youngsters. Thirdly, putting the first two reasons together, the delay has enabled me to see more clearly the trends which I perceived only dimly in my youthful inexperience, and indeed the years since the first book

was published have brought a reaction against them which, paradoxically, has given them greater substance and reality. The owl of Minerva, Hegel shrewdly noted, flies at dusk; even if, he might have added, the twilight, optimistically speaking, turns out to be temporary.

The most important trend which I then discerned was the continuing expansion of what in the first book was called 'the forgotten middle class', the non-capitalist or professional segment of the middle class which was neglected by contemporary commentators including, most notably, the professionals themselves, who played a role in the rise of Victorian class society out of all proportion to their numbers. The professional class produced most of the social thinkers who supplied the concepts and terminology in which the three major classes, the landed aristocracy, the capitalist entrepreneurs and the manual workers, thought about themselves and achieved class consciousness. They also mounted a critique of industrial society which began, even at its height, to undermine the entrepreneurial hegemony and reform its worst excesses, in the shape of factory legislation, public health regulation, control of adulteration of food and drugs and pollution of the environment, housing by-laws, state educational provision, and the like. But the professional class was then only on the brink of the massive expansion in size and influence which was to carry it to domination in the twentieth century. Not only was it to overtake the landed and capitalist elites in numbers and importance; it was also to infiltrate all the major institutions of the modern state and modern society, from the executive government and parliament to the private capitalist corporations, and eventually to take them over.

At the same time the professional class was to transform society itself, not by replacing the plutocracy of landlords and capitalists as the ruling class, but in a much more radical and subtle way. Professionalism differed from land and capital as an organizing principle of social structure in not being confined to the few, those who owned the limited material resources of society and could charge the rest, in rent, profits or a lien on their labour, for the use of them. Based on human capital and specialized expertise, it could become as extensive as there were human beings capable of skilled and specialized service. In addition to the traditional, pre-industrial professions and the new technological and welfare ones,

there could be professional managers of landed property and capitalist companies and even professionalized manual workers. The ownership of human capital was thus capable, at least in theory, of reaching much further down the social structure than the ownership of land or capital in amounts capable of supporting a ruling class, and was thus able to transform society not from the top down but from within. Instead of the horizontal layers we call classes in vertical conflict with one another, the new society would be constructed on a different principle, of professional career hierarchies rearing up alongside one another, some rising higher than the rest but each in competition to persuade society to yield as much power, prestige and income as it could win. Vertical structures, horizontal rivalries, replaced or, more accurately, overlay the horizontal structures and vertical antagonisms of class, which nevertheless, as old structures do, still survived in the 'residues' of language and, to a lesser extent, in politics.

Meanwhile, since great structural transformations reflect profound changes in mental outlook, the professional social ideal – the professionals' ideal of how society should be organized and of the ideal citizen to organize it – began to infiltrate men's minds and replace the entrepreneurial ideal on which Victorian society had been founded. The latter was an ideal based on capital as the engine of the economy, setting in motion the production of goods and services and calling forth the other factors of production, land and labour, and on competition as the fairest and most efficient way of distributing its rewards. Its ideal citizen was the self-made man, the entrepreneur who had made his way to success and fortune by his own unaided efforts. The professional ideal was based on trained expertise and selection by merit, a selection made not by the open market but by the judgment of similarly educated experts. Its ideal citizen was also a self-made man of sorts, who had risen by native ability (with a little help from his educational institutions) to mastery of a skilled service vital to his fellow citizens. The difference was that the entrepreneur proved himself by competition in the market, the professional by persuading the rest of society and ultimately the state that his service was vitally important and therefore worthy of guaranteed reward. The first called for as little state interference as possible; the second looked to the state as the ultimate guarantor of professional status.

Both ideals believed in equality of opportunity – in theory if not

always in practice – but only the professional ideal had any room for equality of outcome or treatment. This was because the best guarantee of professional employment was as wide an access to professional services as possible, preferably underwritten by the state. Hence the special role of the professional ideal in the rise of the welfare state, one of the major themes of this book.

Yet this rapprochement with the state, which was in any case coming to play a much larger part in the economy and the life of society under the same pressure of demand for ever more specialized services which had expanded the professions, was to become the Achilles' heel of professionalism. The enormous expansion of state expenditure and of government employment which took place in all advanced twentieth-century societies, tolerable in Britain as long as the economy continued to expand, was to become a source of grievance and hostility when, in the 1970s and 1980s, the long-continuing relative economic decline threatened to become absolute. Along with the accustomed arrogance and condescension of the professions, the elephantiasis of the state provoked a backlash which took the form of what appeared to be, and was even claimed as such by its protagonists, a resurgence of the free market ideology of Victorian England. On closer analysis, however, it turned out to be not a revival of the entrepreneurial ideal but a reaction of one part of the professional class, the private sector managers of the great corporations and their allies, who had never felt the same degree of need for state support, against the other, the public sector professions largely employed by the state.

The bifurcation of the professional ideal reflected the splitting of the professional class into two warring factions. It also heralds the political dilemma facing contemporary Britain and by extension professional society everywhere: the unwelcome choice between the two extremes of an authoritarian state run by powerful and domineering professional bureaucrats and a more diffuse neo-feudal system of great private corporations run by equally dangerous and domineering professional managers.

Once again we stand at the threshold of what may become a great transformation of society. Which way does the future lie? This time we cannot say, 'What that society *was* to be, and how it was to evolve . . . , must await another book.' What it *is* to be must await another generation and, this time, another historian.

PREFACE

*

Before or after he was impeached as a judge for taking bribes, Francis Bacon wrote in his posthumous *Maxims of the Law*:

I hold every man to be a debtor to his profession, from which as men do of course seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they to endeavour themselves, by way of amends, to be a help and an ornament thereunto.

History is a profession of debtors, if not indeed of thieves, who shamelessly borrow or steal from one another, and who in fact could not trade upon their own capital alone. To change the metaphor, we could not see even as far as we do without standing on the shoulders of our predecessors. The history of a hundred crowded years of modern English society would be impossible to write without calling on the aid of scores, if not hundreds, of scholars, by no means all of them historians, many of them friends and colleagues, most of them unknown to me except through their writings. My debts to them will be obvious from the notes to the text, and I hope that they will take each reference as a grateful thank-you for much needed help.

It would be almost impossible to list all the friends and colleagues with whom, over the years, I have discussed some of the ideas in this book, but there are a few who single themselves out by their generous encouragement and support, whether or not they agreed with me (and I fear they often did not). Among them Asa Briggs, Theo Barker, Daniel Bell, Jack Hexter, Seymour Martin Lipset, Lawrence Stone, Michael (F. M. L.) Thompson and Martin Wiener deserve more thanks than I can say. My colleagues at Lancaster and Northwestern Universities, notably Tim Breen, Eric Evans, Bill (T. W.) Heyck and Austin Woolrych, were enormously understanding and supportive. Eric Evans, Bill Heyck, Tony Morris and George Robb read and commented on part or all of the manuscript, to my gain which might have been greater but for my stubborn adherence to my views.

I must also thank Lancaster University and its History Department for the long years of camaraderie and endless conversation, the Shelby Cullom Davis Center at Princeton University for a year of gestation and research in stimulating company, the National Humanities Center for a year of research and writing at that ideal intellectual retreat in the woods of North

PREFACE

Carolina, and Northwestern University for welcoming a refugee from the British university system and making him feel at home in a land which still appreciates education. Finally, my warmest thanks go to my wife Joan, who gave unstintingly of her abundant enthusiasm, sympathetic criticism and effervescent personality, read the manuscript and saved me from endless slips of the pen (or the computer keys), and paid me the handsomest compliment of all by becoming a social historian herself.

Northwestern University
November 1987

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THE MEANING OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY

After the unanswerable question whether human civilization will survive for much longer or succumb to a catastrophe that may destroy all sentient life on earth, the most important question facing mankind today is: if we escape the holocaust, what sort of society will we survive to live in? What sort of society is it that has brought us to this brink, of unprecedented power both for creation and destruction? All of us now in the more economically advanced countries routinely enjoy material comforts far beyond the luxuries of Cleopatra, Kubla Khan or even Queen Victoria. We travel faster and more freely than Ariel, hear sounds and sweet airs more appealing than Prospero's, conjure living pictures out of the void at the touch of a button, have instant access to grand opera, ballet, classical and rock music, the Olympic Games and the World Cup, and all the delights that our ancestors could only dream of. And most of us live lives far longer, fuller and freer from pain than our predecessors.

At the same time we live in greater fear, not just of those old enemies famine, plague and war (the Sahel drought, the AIDS epidemic and the Gulf War show that those enemies are still with us), but of total extermination, if not by the instant horror of nuclear holocaust then by the slow attrition of the environment. In pursuit of the Nirvana of material bliss and avoidance of the Inferno of nuclear destruction we also have to choose politically, between a Western version of democracy that allows free play to competitive forces but may end in the survival of anti-democratic concentrations of economic power, and an Eastern version that claims to put human welfare first but from the outset sacrifices freedom to equality.

What has brought us to this pass? Faced with such overwhelming successes and dangers, we may well think with Emerson that 'Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind.'¹ It is clear, however, that men and women working together in social organizations have produced these dilemmas. We ourselves, wittingly or unwittingly, are the authors of our own prosperity and potential destruction. Whole armies of experts – scientists, technologists, industrial managers, highly skilled workers, medical researchers, artists, writers, teachers, administrators and politicians – have contributed to our promising and perilous situation. The world we have gained and may be about to lose is the consequence of a myriad human activities which have only one thing in common: they are increasingly specialized, increasingly diverse, increasingly skilled – in a word, increasingly professional. The twentieth is not, *pace* Franklin D. Roosevelt, the century of the common man but of the uncommon and increasingly professional expert.

1 CLASS VERSUS HIERARCHY

We live, in fact, in an increasingly professional society. Modern society in Britain, as elsewhere in the developed world, is made up of career hierarchies of specialized occupations, selected by merit and based on trained expertise. Where pre-industrial society was based on passive property in land and industrial society on actively managed capital, professional society is based on human capital created by education and enhanced by strategies of closure, that is, the exclusion of the unqualified. Landed and industrial wealth still exerts power but is increasingly managed by corporate professionals in property companies and business corporations. The professional hierarchies cut across the horizontal solidarities of class in the warp and weft of the social fabric. Both class and hierarchy are an integral part of the fabric and neither ever quite disappears from view. The 'great functional interests' of land, trade and finance, each representing a vertical swathe from landlord through farmer to labourer or merchant through putter-out to craftsman, predominated over the latent class conflict of eighteenth-century society.² The organized antagonisms of the Anti-Corn Law League against the landlords and of the Chartists against both landed politicians and industrial employers brought

class to the face of the cloth in Victorian society. In late twentieth-century Britain, despite the survival of class rhetoric and class-based political parties, the warp of professionalism is beginning to show through and overlay the weft of class.

A professional society is more than a society dominated by professionals. The professionals are not just another ruling class, replacing the landlords of pre-industrial society and the capitalists of industrial society as in James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* – though there is the ever-present danger that some of them might try to become so. Professionalism permeates society from top to bottom, in two ways. Firstly, the professional hierarchies – not all of them equal in status or rewards, or stretching as far as the top – reach much further down the social pyramid than ever landlordship or even business capital did, and embrace occupations formerly thought beyond the reach of professional aspiration. As more and more jobs become subject to specialized training and claim expertise beyond the common sense of the layman – and all professionals are laymen to the other professions – their occupants demand the status and rewards of a profession. In these days of increasingly employed professionals – close to the original model of the clergy or the military rather than medicine or the law, though even doctors and lawyers are now mostly salaried employees – this means a secure income, a rising salary scale, fringe benefits such as paid holidays and sick leave, and an occupational pension. Such professional conditions of work are increasingly within reach not merely of non-manual workers but of increasing numbers of the manual working class.

Secondly, a professional society is one permeated by the professional social ideal. A social ideal is a model of how society should be organized to suit a certain class or interest and of the ideal citizen and his contribution to it. Pre-industrial society was permeated by the aristocratic ideal based on property and patronage. Passive property, usually in land, provided the means for the ideal citizen, the leisured gentleman, to offer his unique contribution of political rule, moral leadership and encouragement of art, literature and sport. Patronage enabled him to select the recruits for those positions of power and influence not filled by property alone. Industrial society was permeated by the entrepreneurial ideal based on active capital and competition, on business investment as the engine of the economy run by the active

owner-manager, ideally the self-made man who rose to wealth and influence by his own intrinsic worth and won out in open competition. The rival ideal of the working class, never achieved in practice, was the collective ideal of labour and co-operation, of labour as the sole source of wealth and co-operative endeavour as the fairest means of harnessing and rewarding it, and of the worker's right to the whole produce of labour. The professional ideal, based on trained expertise and selection by merit, differed from the other three in emphasizing human capital rather than passive or active property, highly skilled and differentiated labour rather than the simple labour theory of value, and selection by merit defined as trained and certified expertise. No more or no less than the rest did it live up to reality. Not all landlords were benevolent gentlemen, not all capitalists self-made men, not all wage earners more concerned with rising with their class rather than out of it. And not all professional men were prepared to let merit rise without help from family wealth or privileged education. Professional society is based on merit, but some acquire merit more easily than others.

The ideals compete in a wider field than the economic market for income and wealth. They compete in the societal market for income, power and status. To complicate the metaphor and make the social fabric three-dimensional, we can envisage society - any society - as an *equi-valent tetrahedron*, a three-sided pyramid, its faces labelled (with acknowledgments to Max Weber) class, power and status.³ The faces are only three ways of looking at the same social reality, from the economic, the political, and the socio-ideological point of view. No face - *pace* Marx (or, rather, the vulgar Marxists) with the economic interpretation of society, Ralf Dahrendorf with the primacy of political authority in 'coordinated organizations' (*Herrschaftsverbanden* - derived indeed from Weber), or Weber himself with his emphasis on charisma, religious belief and morality - is more fundamental than the other two. They are *equi-valent*, of equal worth, at least until one of them wins out in the competition. Talk of economic substructure and political or cultural superstructure, as in the Marxist or *Annales* schools of historiography, is premature until one examines empirically the society in question.

Industrial society was of course based on the ownership of capital, but capital itself was based on the concept of absolute