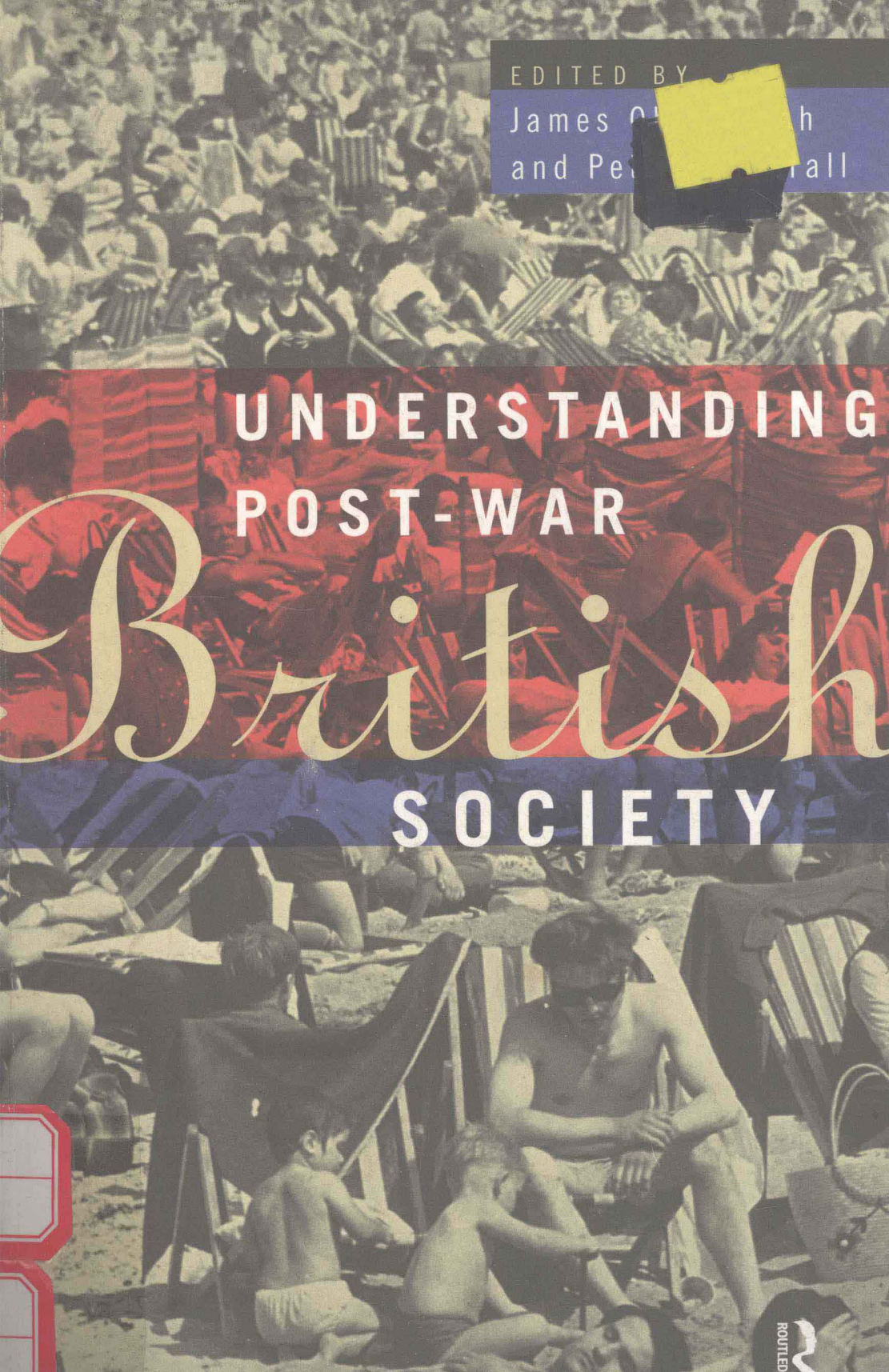
EDITED BY
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UNDERSTANDING
POST-WAR
British
SOCIETY

Understanding post-war British society

Edited by James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall

London and New York

First published 1994
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Typeset in Times by J&L Composition Ltd, Filey, North Yorkshire.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ Press (Padstow) Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Understanding post-war British society / edited by James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0–415–10939–6 : $65.00. – ISBN 0–415–10940–X (pbk.) : $17.50
1. Great Britain – Social conditions – 1945– I. Obelkevich, Jim.
II. Catterall, Peter, 1961–
HN385.5.U53 1994
306 .0941–dc20 94-7263
CIP

ISBN 0–415–10939–6 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–10940–X (pbk)

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Introduction

Understanding British society

James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall

British society is a complicated affair, full of loose ends and bits that don't fit. This may be a good thing for the people who live in it, but it is a source of frustration for those who study it and try to understand it. Every attempt to sum it up in a simple formula – as a 'class society' or whatever – has proved to have so many exceptions and qualifications that it was more trouble than it was worth. The first thing to understand about British society is that there are no short-cuts, no master keys.

The aim of this book is therefore modest. It makes few references to Weber, Durkheim and the other great names of the sociological tradition. It deliberately rejects the idea that British society is best understood as a giant monolithic structure; it does not try to tie up all the loose ends in a single knot of grand theory. Instead it follows a pluralistic approach, taking a fresh look at the loose ends themselves – population, the family, work, leisure, religion and so on – and tries to make sense of them in their own right, with each chapter summarising recent research on a particular topic. The authors have also tried to put their subjects in historical perspective, retracing the course and causes of change in the post-war period. The assumption is that it is better to understand particular themes in some detail, and in historical depth, than it is to bandy about vague generalisations about 'class' or 'capitalism' or 'hegemony' or whatever. British society, as it emerges from this book, is diverse and ever-changing – and incapable of being summed up in any simple formula.

The authors are a mixed team of mainly sociologists and historians and their chapters naturally reflect their individual interests and concerns. Some focus chiefly on the role of the state and on the consequences of official policies; some are preoccupied with questions of gender. The book does not lay down a party line, and the authors' findings point in different directions. But they do suggest a few lessons of a more general nature.

The first is about the role of ideology. A decade or two ago the ideology most in favour was Marxism, and it had an influence not only on the relatively small group of committed Marxists but also on the great majority of sociologists who politically were firmly within the Labour Party. In

its time Marxism had a positive role to play. It reminded us that society was not a harmonious, integrated, organic unity; that poverty was a reality; and that class differences still mattered.

But Marxism got many things wrong. It was at a loss to account for the spread of affluence and the rise in living standards. Even on its chosen ground of class, it was unconvincing. Its master theme of class struggle could not be squared with what was actually happening in post-war Britain. It could not come to terms with the middle classes – their growth, diversity and cultural fragmentation. And it was equally baffled by the working classes, who so often voted for the 'wrong' political party – the Conservatives – rather than for Labour. This lack of fit between Marxist notions of class consciousness and the actual voting behaviour of the working class was an embarrassment, and it could not be covered up by such devices as 'false consciousness' or 'hegemony'. The fact was that most workers were not socialists and did not want a socialist revolution; their political outlook was incapable of being explained in Marxist categories. And when Marxists were faced with divisions in society other than those of class – such as gender, nationality, race, religion or age – they either tried to reduce them to class conflict or ignored them altogether. If Marxism ever provided an adequate analysis of British society – which may be doubted – it does no longer.

Our problem is that while we can see the deficiencies of Marxism, we do not as yet have an alternative set of reference points to put in its place. One possibility is the neo-liberal and free market ideas that came back into fashion in the 1980s. They propose a very different model of social behaviour, based on individual aspirations and expectations, and they have had an impact upon economic and, increasingly, on social policy. But their effect on British sociology, so far, has been limited. The two leading neo-liberals, David Marsland and Peter Saunders, have made some telling criticisms of sociological orthodoxy, exposing its leftish bias, its prejudice against the market and against capitalism, its naïve assumption that socialism offered a better way. But they have still to construct a distinctive sociology of their own.

Today the most fashionable ideology is feminism. Like any ideology, it has strengths and weaknesses, and its effects on sociology have been mixed. Its great positive contribution has been to bring women, and gender, into the centre of sociological enquiry. Sociology has at last opened its eyes to the question of gender – a crucial advance and one that was long overdue.

But feminism also has its less helpful side. Just as Marxism often degenerated into a series of crude leftist slogans known as vulgar Marxism, so feminism has its contemporary equivalent in what could be called vulgar feminism. Its reductionist catchphrases are all too familiar: 'patriarchy', women's 'common oppression', 'women's values', the family as a

'site of oppression', 'all men are rapists', 'feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice', etc., etc. The result is a seductive but simplistic tale of evil, powerful men oppressing helpless, innocent women. Far from opening our eyes to hidden truths, this kind of sloganising only creates new myths, and prevents us from seeing women, and men, as they really are. The result is demonology, not sociology.

One of its most misleading assumptions is that women were nothing but victims. But there have been millions of exceptions, notably the working-class women who, far from being subordinate and put-upon, were the powerful, central and dominant figures in their families. Nor, contrary to the myth of 'common oppression', were all women equally disadvantaged: middle- and upper-class women were among the most privileged people in society and had vastly more in common with their husbands than with their working-class (or black) 'sisters', whom they shamelessly exploited when they employed them as domestic servants. No more convincing is the claim that women are excluded from power. Margaret Thatcher not only attained supreme power but wielded it more ruthlessly than any male prime minister in British history. And women today hold the posts of director of public prosecutions and of director of MI5 – at the heart of the state's security apparatus.

It is well known that since the end of the war the proportion of women in paid employment has increased dramatically. But the claim that *all* working women want to pursue 'careers', and are only held back by 'glass ceilings' imposed by men, is yet another myth. Undoubtedly such barriers existed and still exist, but historically working women have jobs rather than careers. The primary commitment for many women is often still not to work but to their traditional role in rearing a family – just as it was for their predecessors in the 1940s.

Another source of error has been the tendency to inflate the achievements of feminism, to assume that if women's condition improved, feminism deserves the credit. But the expansion of higher education, for example, which benefited women (especially those from the middle class) far more than it did men, came before, not after, the revival of feminism at the end of the 1960s. Feminism was not the cause of women's entry into university education: it was, if anything, one of its consequences. Similarly, the trend for married women to return to paid employment started early in the post-war period and owed nothing to feminism. Misleading too is the tendency to inflate the size of the feminist movement itself – to assume that all women are discontented with their lot and are in some sense feminist. In fact, most women have accepted their role in the family and in society and have not questioned or challenged it. Far from being instinctive feminists, most women have rejected the feminist movement and what they see as its dogmatism and arrogance.

Underlying the vulgar feminist scenario is the rather insulting assump-

tion that women are so weak that they, their lives and their identities are controlled totally by men. But the inconvenient fact is that femininity is constructed by women just as much as it is by men – and that women also play a central part in the construction, and perpetuation, of masculinity itself. Scapegoating men as the source of all evil gets us nowhere. We have to come to terms with men as they are, and with their capacity, like that of women, for good and for evil.

Marxism and feminism can both provide powerful insights. But each also has its blind spots and its limitations. Just as Marxists had little to say to workers who preferred the *Sun* to *New Left Review*, so feminism makes a poor guide to the vast majority of women who are not feminist, who reject feminism, and who find *Woman* and *Best* more rewarding than *Spare Rib*. People have to be understood in their own terms: this can not be done by imposing on them some alien ideological agenda – Marxist or feminist – from outside.

Some of these same criticisms apply to what is probably the dominant outlook in British sociology today, which is feminist and left of centre. It tends to be highly critical of British society, which it sees as swarming with inequalities and injustices. It seeks to expose the evils of racism and sexism, the disparity in power and in life-chances between rich and poor. It is appalled by the unfairness it sees in British society. Inevitably it is disappointed by the fact that these evils do not arouse more protest, more opposition. It asks why the 'oppressed' – workers, women, blacks and others – do not challenge the system, reform it, even overthrow it.

Such a question is certainly worth asking. There is a great deal of inequality in Britain, and exposing and highlighting it is one of sociology's essential duties. Yet few people, even its main victims, do much about it. One explanation is to blame the media. There would be more protest, it is often said, if only the media did not conceal injustice and distract attention from a corrupt system. But this does not take us very far. The media expose faults, failings and injustices in Britain every day of the week. The real answer is that faults, failings and injustices are only part of the picture. Britain cannot be understood merely as a collection of 'social problems', as an anthology of 'oppression', whether based on class, race, gender or whatever. Nor can it be understood in terms of 'struggle' – whether between 'dominant' and 'radical', middle-class and working-class, men and women, old and young, or whites and blacks. There is much more to British society than this simple tale of goodies and baddies.

Sociology, if it is to fill in the larger picture, needs to look at some of the more positive things that have happened in Britain during the last few decades. There is, above all, the huge improvement in standards of living. Despite the widening of the gap between rich and poor during the 1980s, most people are far better-off now than their predecessors were a genera-

tion ago. Working-class people today take for granted such things as domestic appliances and foreign holidays which then were in short supply, or unavailable, even to the well-off. There has also been a great deal of upward social mobility. Many young people from working-class families entered higher education and embarked on non-manual careers; even larger numbers started work in manual occupations and climbed into non-manual ones. Women too benefited from the expansion of higher education. Indeed, the numbers of women going to university increased much faster than the numbers of students from working-class backgrounds. British society has often been described, by sociologists and others, as rigid and class-ridden. But it has also shown a remarkable degree of openness and mobility. If Britain is divided into three classes, then of the men in the top or 'service' class – professionals, managers, proprietors and supervisors – those from manual, working-class origins actually outnumber those born in the service class itself. The majority of British men have either moved into a different class from the one in which they were born, or have married a woman from a different social class. Women's mobility is comparable. Class is a reality, but it is not set in stone. British society does not consist of fixed, monolithic classes, but of much more porous, heterogeneous groupings, in which the majority of people have personal or familial links across class lines.

No one could deny that Britain has its share of conflict. But just as significant is the fact of consensus and shared values. By the standards of many advanced societies, overt conflict, let alone violence, is surprisingly rare in Britain. As many foreign visitors and observers have noted, one of the most striking facts about Britain – despite war, industrialisation and relative decline – is its sheer continuity, the absence of violent social and political disruption. In any international ranking of social stability, Britain, despite the increase in poverty, ranks near the top of the league table. Any study of British society that highlights the conflict presents a very distorted picture of the society as a whole. And with the fall in strikes and industrial disputes in recent years, it could be argued not only that conflict is *not* the most important feature of British society, but also that it is one that is in decline.

A second lesson of this book concerns the role of the state. That role still includes the state's traditional primary duty of protecting the country from external threats and of preserving law and order – which, since the end of the war, has also meant combatting communist subversion and IRA terrorism. (The growth, and abuse, of the 'secret state', with its powers of surveillance, control and covert action, is one of the more worrying developments of the post-war period.)

But no one could ignore the fact that during this period the state's field of operations has expanded enormously, and now extends far beyond its traditional role. Even in the Thatcher and post-Thatcher years, the state

has carried on planning, directing, regulating, employing, subsidising. Indeed, it spends money – and collects taxes – on a vast scale. Public expenditure is the equivalent of about 40 per cent of gross domestic product. Well over half of this expenditure, moreover, is now devoted to the welfare state – to health, education, housing and so on. Social security transfer payments alone account for a third of government spending, the equivalent of (though not counted as part of) over 10 per cent of GDP. Compared with its fairly restricted range of activities earlier in the century, the state now gives the impression of intervening in just about every corner of British life. It has become a central fact in post-war society.

The question, however, is whether it is *the* central fact. And here there are reasons for scepticism. Of course, the state is ultimately responsible for the legal framework within which British society is supposed to operate; but that framework is itself a reflection of past social attitudes, as for example the laws on Sunday trading. And rarely is the law a detailed blueprint: rather, it sets limits to what people can do, and leaves a good deal of leeway within them. And as the example of Sunday trading suggests, there are also places where there is no consensus on what the law ought to be and where it is widely ignored. Where the law is out of touch with contemporary reality, people usually find ways round it.

We also need to be a little sceptical in evaluating the effectiveness of the state in its more specific areas of activity. The state may appear to have policies for everything, but that does not mean that those policies are always successful, or that they are the only factor in the situation. In the area of food and diet, for example, the policies of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries certainly count for less than those of Sainsbury's and Tesco. No policy or policy-maker intended the increase in single-parent families, but it happened anyway. Social policy often simply reacts to developments not of its making. And for consistent ineffectiveness and failure, it would be hard to match the record of governments in trying to manage the economy. Their policies have shown far more misses than hits, despite (or because of) the fact that they had plenty of expert advice from economists, and despite the fact that they controlled the main economic levers, such as interest rates.

The gap between what governments want and what they get can be seen in the biggest (and most expensive) policy area of all, the welfare state. The aims of its founders, after 1945, were nothing less than to liberate the people of Britain from ignorance, want, squalor, idleness and disease. Today even its most ardent champions would not claim that it has achieved those aims. While it has undoubtedly done much good, overall it has been something of a disappointment, falling well short of the high hopes expressed for it in the 1940s and 1950s. Although the nation's health has undoubtedly improved since the establishment of the National Health Service, the NHS can not take all the credit for this, nor has it succeeded in

eliminating serious disparities in illness and mortality between classes and regions. In housing, tower blocks are universally acknowledged as a human disaster.

But perhaps the most striking example of the failure of government has been the steady rise in crime. Crime has gone on increasing throughout the post-war period, in periods both of high and of low unemployment, despite changes in policing, sentencing, and the party in office. Indeed, government policies have been blamed by critics of both left and right for contributing to the crime wave. Where the left argues that Thatcherite economic policies of the 1980s led to unemployment and crime, the right, meanwhile, has pointed an accusing finger at 'liberal' educational and social policies of the 1960s, which it claims have undermined respect for law and order. Both sides recognise that the effects of policy may be very different from those intended.

Society is not just a lump of clay to be given shape by the master hand of the policy-maker. Within it are interests and forces that have a life and will of their own and which, actively or passively, resist and deflect the might of the state, making its policies ineffective if not actually counterproductive. Social policy is only one influence among many on social conditions. If it is often the most publicly visible, it is only occasionally the most important. That does not stop reformers of all kinds from looking to the state to make the changes they seek. Compared with corporations and other institutions in British society, the state is more public, more accessible and easier to influence. But its frequent lack of success should be a lesson to us. The state is still the most direct and obvious way of trying to change society. But it is not the best way of understanding society.

An obsession with the state and with policy has one further bad effect. It leads to a preoccupation with causes and origins, to the neglect of results and outcomes. To turn again to the question of food and diet, what matters in the end is not the policies, whether of the government or of the supermarkets or of the food industry, but what food people actually eat and the role of food in their lives. And to understand these things we need to talk to the people themselves. The proof of the pudding is not after all in pudding policy, or in the pudding industry, but in the eating. In housing, similarly, what matters is not just the government's housing policy, or the role of building societies and local authorities, but how people actually use their houses and live in them. In the end we need to study outcomes: not just what policies do to people but what people do with policies.

A final lesson is the importance of history. Critics of British society have often despaired of its apparently invincible conservatism – its immobility and resistance to change. But what these chapters show is that it has been far from static. Since 1945 it has been through phases of austerity and prosperity, booms and slumps, of demographic booms and bulges. There have been big changes, on the whole beneficial, in the lives of women and

of the working classes. Contrary to the theory of a fixed and immutable Britain, these changes have not been limited to the surface of society but have reached its deeper structures. And they are still taking place.

What this means is that present-day society cannot be fully understood in present-day terms. It needs to be seen in a deeper chronological perspective, one that goes back to the early post-war decades and indeed beyond. Sociology, in other words, is incomplete without history. The two disciplines have sometimes mistrusted each other as incompatible or opposed ways of understanding society. In fact, they are overlapping and complementary, each having something valuable to contribute to the other. Sociologists can enrich historians' appreciation of social structures and relationships, while historians can provide a longer-term perspective, an understanding of change over time and why change took place when it did. What they have in common is, above all, a respect for evidence and a commitment to disciplined empirical research: they know that the truth will never be revealed by theory alone. Sociologists and historians, working together, have produced this book; their co-operation is itself one of the keys to a better understanding of British society.

Chapter 1

Trends in post-war British social history

Edward Royle

INTRODUCTION

All ages are ages of transition and only rarely and coincidentally does history see decisive breaks at century ends or, in modern times at least, at the change of a monarch. Indeed, it would be strange if such breaks were evident in social history. The 'nineteenth century' or the 'twentieth century' are meaningless concepts, though they have some mythic power: we expect change and so to some extent we create it. In this chapter I shall argue that, in several important respects, the decisive break with what we think of as the nineteenth century, or the late-Victorian world, does not come with the death of Victoria a few days into the twentieth century, nor even with the First World War, but in the period after 1945. The major trend in this latter age of transition, has been an accelerating discontinuity with the past.[1]

Dating this watershed in modern British social history is not easy, for change occurred at different times and rates in different areas of society. One problem is that, because of the war, no national census was conducted in 1941, with the result that one of the social historian's standard sources of information is missing. Clearly there were many changes in society between 1931 and 1951: were these the products of the 1930s, or of the war, or of the immediate post-war period? The answer is, in different cases and to different degrees, all three. But if there were trends emerging in 1951 compared with 1931, these had become much more marked by 1961, which suggests that it is in the post-war period – and especially the 1950s – that the most significant developments occured to create our own period of rapid social change. As Britain recovered, not only from the Second World War but from the aftermath of the war, the deep-seated nature of these changes became fully apparent.

By coincidence there was a new reign beginning in 1952, hailed by contemporaries as 'the new Elizabethan age'. Things may not have turned out quite as those publicists of change intended to imply, but they were right to see how the cumulative effects of social change through successive