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On Class in Elitist Britain

This time last year I attended an event organised by the London Review Bookshop to mark the publication in English of *Returning to Reims* by Didier Eribon and *History of Violence* by Édouard Louis.¹ In Eribon’s celebrated memoir, the Parisian sociologist travels home for the first time in thirty years following the death of his father, a ‘stupid and violent’ man he had never loved and had long held in ‘contempt’.² There he tries to account for the shift in politics of his working class family while he has been away: from supporting the Communist Party to voting for the National Front.

*Returning to Reims* was a significant influence on Louis, inspiring him to write his bestselling first novel, *The End of Eddy*, which he dedicated to Eribon.³ Like the latter’s memoir, *History of Violence* and *The End of Eddy* both in their different ways tell the story of how Louis, having grown up gay and poor in the north of France, was eventually able to escape his working class environment
through education. ‘I realised that was pretty much the only way I could get away from my past’, he writes, ‘not just geographically, but symbolically, socially – that is completely … Studying was the only real escape route I could find’.4 (Although they are from different generations, Eribon and Louis first met at university, the former being a professor at the time and the latter a student. They are now close friends.)

As is customary on these occasions, the authors read from their books and discussed their work and lives, followed by a Q&A session with the audience. During this latter part of the evening they spoke about the transition they had made from the social realm of the working class to that of the middle class, with its very different gestures, knowledges and manners of speech. Recognising they now had a foot in both camps, each said the process of reinventing themselves had nonetheless left them feeling they truly belonged to neither. Arriving in Paris at the age of twenty, for instance, Eribon found it much easier to come out of the sexual closest and assert his homosexuality to his new cosmopolitan friends than to come out of the class closet. It was his working class origins he found shameful and embarrassing and lied about. Yet ‘I never came to share the values of the dominant
class’, he insists. ‘I always felt awkward or incensed when hearing people around me talking scornfully or flippantly about working-class people and their habits and ways of life. After all, that’s where I came from’ (29).

Both authors also described how, as a consequence, they are unsure for whom they are actually writing. They may be addressing the question of what it means to grow up in a working class environment in *Returning to Reims* and *History of Violence*: the violent modes of domination and subjectivation; the profound racism, sexism and homophobia; the social impoverishment; the lack of possibilities that are imaginable, to say nothing of those that are actually realisable. However they are aware few people from that social class are ever likely to read their books, so can hardly say they are writing *for* them. As Eribon acknowledges:

> When people write about the working class world, which they rarely do, it is most often because they have left it behind. They thereby contribute to perpetuating the social illegitimacy of the people they are speaking of in the very moment of speaking about them. This happens even if they write with the goal of exposing and critiquing the very status
of social illegitimacy to which these people are relegated over and over again, because in writing they take a necessary critical distance, and with it comes the position of a judge or an evaluator. (98)

What really captured my attention, though, was the moment Eribon and Louis stressed that what they are trying to do with their writing is ‘reinvent theory’: to produce a theory in which ‘something is at stake’. (Elsewhere, together with Eribon’s partner Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, they have described this as a theory that speaks about ‘class, exploitation, violence, repression, domination, intersectionality’ and yet has the potential to generate the excitement of ‘a Kendrick Lamar concert’). Eribon is of course the author of a well-known biography of the philosopher Michel Foucault. Nevertheless this statement struck me: partly because theory is one of the areas I work in; but also because it’s difficult to imagine many English literary writers of a similar stature engaging with the kind of radical thought Foucault and his contemporaries are associated with, let alone expressing a desire to reinvent it. Since it undermines the idea of the self-identical human subject, that theoretical tradition is often described as antihumanist, even posthumanist in some of its more recent manifestations. By
contrast, English literary culture is predominantly humanist and liberal, seeing education in general, and the reading and writing of literature in particular, as a means of freeing the mind of a rational human individual whose identity is more or less fixed and secure.

One explanation given for this difference is that, historically, writers in England have been more closely associated with the ruling elite: with public schools, Oxbridge colleges and the tradition of the gentleman as amateur scholar. It’s an association that contrasts sharply with the cafes, streets and factory shop floors of the more political French *intellectual*. Suspicious as we are in this country of radical and abstract ideas – epitomized by the emphasis in France on the universal values of freedom, justice and liberty since at least the revolution of 1879 – ‘the intellectual’ is often viewed negatively: as someone who is arrogant, pretentious and full of self-importance. Paradoxically, to be viewed approvingly as intellectual in England it’s better not to be *too* intellectual at all. So middlebrow authors such as Yuval Noah Harari (Oxford) and Mary Beard (Cambridge) are considered acceptable and taken seriously, as they can write clearly in ‘plain English’ and communicate with a wider public, even attain the holy grail of a popular readership. High theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Catherine Malabou are not,
as their philosophy and use of language is held as being too complex for most ‘real’ people to understand. ‘They are all there’, runs a recent book review, ‘the first-team of intellectual narcissists and jargon-mongers: Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous et al. … the theoreticians … primarily responsible for turning literary studies into the heartland of the incomprehensible and irrelevant, and alienating the ordinary reader.’ (And that’s in the *Times Higher Education*, the U.K.’s leading weekly magazine for academics.)

This is why the literary novel in England today is so unashamedly humanist. The Scottish journalist Stuart Kelly (Oxford) even goes so far as to compare it unfavourably to the ‘posthuman novel’ that is the streamed TV series Westworld. (I’m drawing on newspaper commentary here to show mainstream culture in the U.K. is not *entirely* dominated by uncritical liberal humanist thought.) For Kelly, the modern literary novel and its understanding of life is ‘outdated’, still constrained by its 18th century origins. Nowhere is this more evident than with its ‘unquestioned foundations’, based as it is on the idea of the autonomous human subject as protagonist, someone who has an ‘intact self’, ‘cogent agency’, ‘memories they trust – and can trust – and desires they understand’. As Kelly
points out:

Philosophers, psychoanalysts and neuroscientists have all called into question these notions that we cherish – will, self, choice, desire, recollection – but the novel has failed to keep up with these insights. I know myself that I do not know myself, that what I want is not what I choose to want, that the ‘me’ that was 11 is barely recognisable as the ‘me’ that is 44. Some novelists – Will Self [University College School, Hampstead & Oxford] … Tom McCarthy [Dulwich College & Oxford], Nicola Barker [Cambridge], Lydia Millet, and the much-underrated Nigel Dennis (my copy of Cards of Identity is much-thumbed and has a clipping of a review by Hélène Cixous inside it) – have tried, and sometimes succeeded in creating novels where the self is not fixed but fluid, where want is both absence and yearning, where the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are realised as stories.⁹

And to be sure, the work of Tom McCarthy – to take just one of Kelly’s examples – can be viewed as ‘a kind of grand anti-humanist manifesto’, as the English novelist readily concedes.¹⁰ Culture here is not about providing ‘a vanity mirror for liberal
society to see itself reflected back in the way it wants to see itself’. Culture, for McCarthy, should rather ‘disrupt’ and create trouble. Consequently, ‘in order to do what needs to be done you need to reject a certain set of assumptions, certain models of subjectivity’, he claims – ‘for example, the contemporary cult of the individual, the absolute authentic self who is measured through his or her absolutely authentic feeling’. ¹¹

Yet if McCarthy strives to bring the concept of the discrete, sovereign human subject into question in the content of novels such as Remainder and C, it’s a different matter when it comes to how he himself actually functions as an author. There, for all his interest in antihumanist theory and modernist writing, McCarthy serves to sustain, rather than shatter, the liberal humanist model of subjectivity and its assumptions. ¹² This is perhaps most apparent from the manner in which McCarthy, as with his 18th century predecessors – Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, Smollett (all of them ‘affluent, middle-class white men’, Kelly points out) – continues to act as if his novels are, in the last instance, the original creative expression of his own personality as an absolutely singular and unique individual. At the very least McCarthy considers his subjectivity to be fixed enough to be able to assert the moral right
to be identified as the sole *human* author of his written works, and to claim copyright over them on an all rights reserved basis as his isolable intellectual property, ‘in accordance with the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988’.\(^\text{13}\) (Even the unnumbered pages in a text count, as McCarthy will surely know from his reading of Derrida: ‘*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*’, and all that.)

In *Whatever Happened To Modernism?*, Gabriel Josipovici (Cheltenham College & Oxford) characterises the novel of the Julian Barnes (City of London School & Oxford)/Martin Amis (Oxford) generation as the product of a non-modernistic literary culture that is determinedly realist, preferring sentimental humanism and readability to the kind of ground-breaking experimentation he associates with previous eras of the European novel. In their ‘petty-bourgeois uptightness’, their ‘terror of not being in control’, their ‘desire to boast and to shock’, Amis and co. are like ‘prep-school boys showing off’, he writes.\(^\text{14}\) And this may indeed be the case. It may also be the case that for us to disdain the legacy of modernism – not just ‘radical writers’ such as Kafka and Beckett, but also Bataille and Derrida in philosophy, Freud and Lacan in psychoanalysis, Godard and Lynch in film – ‘as if it was just some irritation that got in the way of an ongoing rational
enlightenment’ is, as McCarthy says, ‘ethically wrong and aesthetically rubbish’. Still, the cure for English culture’s addiction to the world-view of prosperous, middle-class white men – or fear of revolution, the underclass and the other, depending on how you look at it – is not simply more modernism. As Isabel Waidner emphasizes in their anthology of innovative writing (Waidner’s preferred pronouns are they/them/their), even experimental literature in England is predominantly white, bourgeois and patriarchal, very much to the exclusion of (non-Oxbridge) BAME, LGBTQIAP+, working class and other nonconforming identities.

(The Preface to Josipovici’s Whatever Happened To Modernism? actually begins: ‘The first extra-curricula lecture I attended at Oxford…’) Nor is this particularly surprising. After all, 7% of the UK population attend private school (that’s over 600,000 pupils, double the number of the 1970s), and approximately 1% graduate from Oxford or Cambridge. Yet it was reported in 2018 that ‘of the poets and novelists included in Who’s Who … half went to private schools; and 44% went to Oxbridge.’ One result of this systematic bias is that non-white British authors published fewer than 100 titles in 2016.
I opened by referring to social realms that contain a lack of possibilities that are even imaginable, let alone achievable. It’s worth noting in this context that, of the 9,115 children’s books published in the U.K. in 2017, only 4% featured BAME characters. Just 1% had a BAME lead character, 96% having no BAME characters whatsoever.\(^{19}\) Similarly, with regard to the 100 bestselling children’s picture books published in 2018, not a single author or illustrator was BAME.\(^{20}\) Nor is it only literary culture that’s affected by what Eribon describes as the ‘terrible injustice’ of the ‘unequal distribution of prospects and possibilities’ (52).

Comparable statistics can be provided for the arts, drama, music, business, politics, the law, medicine, the military, the civil service, the media and journalism. 54% of the U.K.’s ‘top’ news journalists were educated in private schools, for example; while of the 81% who attended university, more than a half were educated at Oxbridge, with a third attending just one institution, Oxford.\(^{21}\) (As a public broadcaster, the BBC is supposed to be politically neutral. Once John Humphrey’s retires, however, Emily Maitlis [Cambridge] will be the only presenter on either the BBC’s Today or Newsnight programmes not educated privately. Yet the political bias inherent in such a situation is rarely acknowledged or remarked upon, even though much of the country’s understanding
of politics is shaped by the upper middle class voices found on these programmes.) Moreover, 94% of all journalists in the U.K. are white and as few as 0.2% black.\textsuperscript{22} Even when it comes to that most stereotypical of working-class sports, football (which in Louis’ first memoir Eddy’s father suggests he play to toughen him up), the figures are barely any different. Over half of the England players at the 2018 World Cup in Russia were from BAME backgrounds. Yet there were reportedly only two BAME journalists from English newspapers and press agencies there out of approximately one hundred.\textsuperscript{23} (2\% is better than 0.2\%, I guess.)

In a modest bid to counter such inequality of opportunity and stalling of social mobility, the BBC Radio 6 presenter Cerys Matthews has said she wants to program less music on her show by artists who’ve been given a leg up by virtue of attending public school, and more music by people from all walks of life, including women and those with a working-class upbringing.\textsuperscript{24} Which makes me wonder: if we want to foster culture in England that’s not so liberal and humanist, if we want to develop an understanding of life, agency and subjectivity that is more complex – or at least not quite so outdated – do we need to adopt a similar stance? Instead of setting up prizes like the Goldsmiths in order to reward literature
that is *daring* and *inventive*, do we need to publish (and perhaps read and cite) fewer texts by people who went to public school or Oxbridge, and more by writers from other backgrounds?[^25] Do we even need quotas?

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**Endnotes**

[^2]: Eribon, *Returning To Reims* (California: Semiotext(e), 2013) 33. Unless indicated otherwise, all further references in the text are to this book – the U.S. version, which I bought shortly after came out in 2013.
[^7]: This is a reference to another of Eribon’s books: *Michel Foucault et ses contemporains* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).
11 McCarthy, “Grand Anti-Humanist Manifesto”.

On occasion I use the term ‘private school’ to refer to any secondary school that is fee-paying. (They are private in the sense anyone can open one, which distinguishes them from state schools, which are subjected to different rules and regulations.) As it is used here ‘private school’ thus encompasses those fee-paying institutions known as ‘public schools’ (public because they were established by statute and acknowledged in law). Strictly speaking, only those ‘leading’ private secondary schools that are members of the self-selecting Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference are ‘public schools’.


Related figures have recently been provided for important broadcasters and editors in news media (‘43% having been privately educated and 36% graduating from Oxbridge’) and newspaper columnists (44% attending either Oxford or Cambridge, with 44% also attending independent school, with a third coming through the ‘independent school to Oxbridge “pipeline” alone’) – The Sutton Trust, ‘Elitist Britain: The Educational Backgrounds of Britain’s Leading People’, The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, June 25, 2019: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Elitist-Britain-2019.pdf.


For more on some of the other professions I mentioned - politics, medicine, the civil service and so on - see Philip Kirby, ‘Leading People 2016’, The Sutton Trust, February 24, 2016: https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/leading-people-2016-education-background/; and The Sutton Trust, ‘Elitist Britain’.


By contrast (and as a way of showing just how narrow and ingrained the world-view of middle-class white men is), McCarthy recalls in Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish how, when the Serpentine Gallery asked him if he’d like to conduct a public dialogue with someone as part of a marathon of poetry they were putting on, he rejected their rather stock idea that it should be with ‘some Faber-and-Faber versifier or other’. His idea of suggesting someone
different in this context, however, turned out to be the cricket commentator Henry Blofeld - ‘who received a top-drawer classical education at Eton… and Cambridge’, McCarthy feels it necessary to add (McCarthy, *Typewriters*, 219-210).

25 After the 2011 jury for the Man Booker prize stated that they were going to privilege writing that was ‘readable’, the Goldsmith’s Prize was established in 2013 – with Josipovici as one of the judges - to explicitly encourage experiments designed to open ‘up new possibilities for the novel form.’