

David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

I must admit to a profound ambivalence about the work of David Cannadine. His reputation has been forged by a continuous stream of widely read (and sometimes influential) studies, and by his success at bridging academic and popular history. His recent appointment to the directorship of the Institute of Historical Research in London solidifies his position as one of Britain's most respected historians. Cannadine writes extremely well, with a seemingly effortless efficiency and erudition, and he often has interesting and enlightening things to say about his chosen topics. However, he subscribes to a model of scholarship which, while often tempered by loosely strung analytical frameworks, is epistemologically unselfconscious. Indeed, it is clear that he eyes the efforts of scholars to wed theoretical considerations with historical analysis as always highly suspect. All these characteristics can be found in his latest book, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, an important and certain-to-be widely cited, synthesis of recent scholarship on the meaning and importance of class in British social history.

It should be noted up front that there is an undercurrent of liberal-empiricist triumphalism running through this book. References to the demise of Marxism, the collapse of the post-war "marxist" consensus, and the absurdity of over-simplified notions of class struggle, litter the text. But Cannadine nonetheless retains the notion that class is still an important subject of study. This is not because class is, or ever has been, the motor dynamic of history that the "marxist" new social history of the 1960s and '70s claimed it was, but because it has been one of the most important terms by which the British have described their social order. Indeed, the dust jacket claims that Cannadine has uncovered the (real) "meanings of class from Adam Smith to Karl Marx to Margaret Thatcher" and shows the "key moments in which thinking about class shifted." Now, while this book is a welcome summation of three decades scholarly effort on the concept of class, and may tell us quite a bit about how *scholars* have interpreted articulations of social perception, Cannadine actually tells us very little that is new about the perception of class between the mid-seventeenth century and the present. And although the book does have incisive things to say about such individuals as Smith, Marx and Thatcher, most of these points are grafted from the arguments of other scholars.

Moreover, while the book has the appearance of a work written from the perspective of someone who has made a severe swerve round the "linguistic turn" — throughout Cannadine evinces less concern with the contours of actual social divisions than with people's perceptions of them — in fact he has pretty much driven straight by post-modernist and post-Marxist arguments about language and representation altogether. He merely offers a lacklustre

royal wave in passing. As a result, there is precious little analytical “uncovering” of any meanings in this book. What we find is a lot of description framed within a master narrative far more totalizing and teleological than vulgar Marxist notions of class conflict. All this is not to say that what Cannadine has done is not useful: in fact, it is a very adept forging of two interrelated arguments from hundreds of widely disparate secondary sources, demonstrating that British historical work on the social order has indeed moved far beyond the research parameters set in the 1950s, '60s and '70s by such seminal leftist historians as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson. Whether Cannadine’s own approach is indicative of the strengths of the new work, or that he has even correctly assessed the ultimate direction of this move, however, is much less certain.

The first of Cannadine’s arguments is that for at least the last three hundred and fifty years the British world (and he does pay more than the usual lip service to the idea of the entire British Isles and the transatlantic connections of “Greater Britain” in this account) has always used one of three general perceptions of the social order: a hierarchical view of society as a continuous ladder with numerous ranks and stations, a tripartite division of society into upper, middle and lower, and a strictly polarized view pitting “us” versus “them.” These three alternative visions of society, according to Cannadine, have often existed simultaneously, and people whose thoughts on the social order have been recorded sometimes stayed true to only one, but just as often, moved between several at different times and in different situations. Moreover, even though the discrete language used to describe these visions of the social order changed considerably over time, the conceptions *behind* the language invariably remained true to one of the three models that Cannadine describes. Thus, to take the polarized vision of “us” versus “them,” at various points in British history, this has been expressed in the form of “the people” versus “old corruption,” “the masses” versus “the classes,” and “the common man” versus “the establishment.” Despite the changed terms and language, however, Cannadine argues the “idea” behind the language remained consistent.

The second major argument in the book is that the language of class (or more accurately, of social characterization) and shifts in this language have not stemmed from actual social realities or changes, but rather from political expediency. Politicians, political commentators and agitators have all deployed variations of the three models of social characterization in order to mobilize their differing constituencies. Thus, those speaking for the “middle” of British society have sometimes used the triadic model to differentiate themselves from both the unwashed masses below them and the profligate and immoral elite above them, but at key moments have also used the polarized language of “us” versus “them” in order to garner sufficient popular support for particular reforms — such as broadening the franchise in the early 1830s. For the evidence and mechanics of this particular line of argument Cannadine borrows

heavily (with, it should be noted, proper acknowledgement) from the arguments of Penny Corfield on the eighteenth century and the ideas of Dror Wahrman's on the early-nineteenth century.¹ The revisionism of these scholars is then skillfully fleshed out by re-examining the evidence used by a large number of British social and political historians, the majority of whom have argued the case quite differently. As a work of re-interpreting existing scholarship, then, this is a *tour de force*. Ultimately, however, Cannadine's main contribution in this book is really quite limited. For the revisionism here ends up merely being a descriptive catalogue of how and when political actors used the three variations of social perception at distinct times and in different circumstances. The mechanics and meaning of social perception, and many crucial "why" questions, are left largely unanswered.

Still, the point that Cannadine wants to hammer home with this book is the insight that political considerations are the basis of social characterizations and perceptions, not actual socio-economic difference. And in this he is reasonably effective, if far too narrow in his definition of "politics." For Cannadine, the new work on the social order justifies the reassertion of the primacy of a narrowly defined liberal view of politics, with a vengeance. But while it is true that over the last twenty years many social historians have sought to re-examine the place of politics and political language in causing change, not all, or even most, of this new work views politics in the way that Cannadine seems to. Arguably, the new political emphasis owes as much to the socio-cultural history conducted in the wake of French post-structuralism, as it does to the return to narrow empiricism by Thatcherite historians of the 1980s. Ironically enough, this major sea-change in the topics of British social historians, and the now widespread, but perhaps erroneous,² belief that social history has too often ignored the importance of political language in constructing popular understandings of the social order, is largely the legacy of leftist British historians like Gareth Stedman Jones and James Epstein.³ It was the work of the widely respected Stedman Jones who initiated a huge debate in British social historical circles when he argued, using the Chartist movement as his datum, that articulations of political language have often been more important in mobilizing people than have their social location or "class interests."⁴ Stedman Jones' use of the arguments of Saussurian linguistics and semiotics marked a decisive move away from the ossifying debate amongst the left during the 1970s between Thompsonian "culturalists" and French structuralists.

Cannadine views these debates of the late 1970s and early '80s as signifying the essential collapse of the "marxist" consensus, capped by the discrediting of Marxism itself in the early 1990s. But Cannadine fails to fully grasp the implications of the evolution of "marxist" social history into a politically orientated socio-cultural history. There may have been a rejection of master-narratives, and a re-emphasis on empirical research and testing, but

historians like Stedman Jones — and even more so, British post-modernist historians like Patrick Joyce and James Vernon — have still struggled to understand the connection between the social and the political in explicitly theoretical terms and to comprehend this relation's epistemological implications. Cannadine seems to have ignored the fact that, by and large, many of the new generation of scholars still reject the liberal premise that a “free market” of ideas governs.⁵ That the politics social historians are interested in are “popular” politics, and to understand the mechanism of popular politics via a return to simple liberal empiricism will not cut it: witness Jon Lawrence's much heralded recent study, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge 1998), which tries to mediate between a materialist empiricism and the study of political representation. In studies such as this, the master narrative of class (and of Party) is abandoned in favour of actually discerning the relationship between political activists and those whom they seek to represent at the local level. Clearly this is not a rehashing of Lewis Namier's micro-political history of the eighteenth century for the nineteenth, but rather an attempt to wed the material context of politics with both a sophisticated understanding of language and a social-constructionist perspective.

Cannadine evades the complex and controversial discussion of social formations and their relationship to the representation of politics by simply noting that this is a “complex and controversial debate” in a footnote. Perhaps because this debate is largely (though certainly not exclusively) occurring within the ranks of the left, Cannadine believed he had no need to address these issues directly. As he sees Marxism, and the academic left in general, as totally discredited, Cannadine has evidently no desire to wade into the theoretical melee of what he obviously considers the desperate internecine wrenching of hair and gnashing of teeth. Instead, despite the little genuflections to Benedict Anderson's over-used term “imagined communities” and a few remarks here and there regarding the latest thinking about language, Cannadine is narrowly empiricist in approach, and takes an imperious position high above such unseemly considerations as epistemological grounding.

Given its evasion of some hard but pressing questions, did we really need a 190 page book (and an additional ninety pages of, admittedly useful, notes) to tell us what most social and cultural historians of Britain already well understood: that the social order of Britain has been viewed in a variety of ways by different people, at different times, and that the role of political language is far more important in the generation of these perceptions than was once asserted? Perhaps Cannadine's innovation has been to suggest that only three essential, but general patterns of social perception have existed, although excluding for the moment questions about race and gender, how many other ways of viewing the social order could there possibly be? Having society viewed as divided into two, three, or more than three pretty much covers the

available options. The only real option left — a society in which there are no perceptible social divisions at all — Cannadine sees as the model that rules in the United States, and it is to emulating this model that he argues the British should aspire. But his comment here strikes me as strangely obtuse. It is beyond me how anyone who has lived in the USA as long as Cannadine has (he was at Columbia for ten years before returning to Britain) could fail to see that the widely used rhetoric of democracy and meritocratic equality is fundamentally undercut by both material stratification, which Cannadine readily acknowledges, and also perceived and expressed social difference.

Putting aside again, for the moment, race and gender divisions, it seems to me that in this observation Cannadine fundamentally misreads the mechanics of social perception. Certainly, class is not understood in America in the same way as in Britain, but the fact that economic circumstances and the belief in social mobility dominate social thinking in America does not militate against popular understandings of social distinctions. The commonly used terms “poor white trash” and “redneck,” the patronizing attitudes of northerners towards southerners (largely on the basis of accent), the fierce competition amongst mostly “middle-class” Americans for Ivy League college placements for their children, and the populist love/hate attitude towards the super rich and media celebrities, all indicate that perceptions of social difference do co-exist alongside real material difference within the USA.

More significantly, Cannadine’s insistence that the historian can look “behind” or “through” language to the core, primordial ideas — a few essential truths — will strike many readers as hopelessly naïve. For what Cannadine fails to account for in his discussion of the classless society in America, and of class stratified society in Britain, is the central role of ideology or cultural discourse or the opacity of language (depending on to which you subscribe) in structuring, mediating, legitimating, disguising or justifying social and political inequalities. There is a lot of discussion about politicized social language (noting it as cynical or sincere) and its use by political actors in this book, but also a curious absence of any mediating mediums. The book reads as a cavalier dismissal of any and all concepts used by recent historians to explain the disjunction between social rhetoric and social subjectivities. No structuring linguistic paradigms, discourses, cultural hegemony, or simple ideological formations grace this book. But a discussion of social perceptions that fails to confront the existence of mediating ideological and cultural constructions, seems to me, to be an acutely flawed exercise. At best it indicates the fundamental blind spots in Cannadine’s own belief-system.

In his universe, individuals are self-autonomous individuals whose perceptions of reality are based on nothing but simple rational choices. Paradoxically, Cannadine also considers the suggestion that social hierarchy is entirely natural and therefore right and inevitable, by (half?) seriously endorsing the claims of evolutionary socio-biologists and their work on other

primates. He notes that, “the implication is that humans are also intrinsically and essentially hierarchical animals, both by nature and throughout most of history ... If this is right, then hierarchy is the primordial human mode of social structure and social perception.” (23) How ironic, then, that the rest of the book’s description of how human *politics* helps shape human perception is, if this endorsement of crude evolutionary determinism is accepted, largely irrelevant.

This leads me to say something about what is glaringly absent in this book: any really critical consideration of the fact that the social order has not merely been riven by perceived socio-economic divisions, but also a variety of other fundamentally social constructs: gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, ethnicity and race, etc. Cannadine does acknowledge “one shortcoming of which [he is] especially aware: these pages do not specifically address the question of what women have thought about class.” (viii) But this observation, grounded in his belief that it is “likely that women visualize the social world, and their place within it, in some ways that are different from men,” entirely ignores the arguments of several books that he cites in his own notes. For it is based on the assumption that perceptions of gender have been themselves fixed, and this stability leads to the possibility of a separate vision of the social order. But surely, as Joan Kelly, Leanore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, Jon Lawrence and Anna Clark — some of the historians that he does cite, plus the numerous feminist scholars that he doesn’t — have argued, perceptions of gender themselves constitute socially constructed divisions, and should thus be analyzed, not alongside, but as they interact with other perceived social divisions.⁶ Given the current social-constructionist direction of much gender history, Cannadine’s remarkable claim that “on balance, gender has destabilized class as a category of historical analysis rather than revived or reinforced it” is thus a fundamental misreading.⁷

But while the new gender history, and some considerations of national distinctions, at least do get an acknowledgement in Cannadine’s book, the same cannot be said for questions of ethnicity or race or others. Yet, like gender and class, ethnicity, race, sexual and religious identity, have all been usefully analyzed from a social constructionist perspective, demonstrating that these categories of difference are very much about representation and social perception.⁸ Perhaps it is churlish to expect one book to cover all these “angles,” but given the claims of the author about the relationship between political rhetoric and social perception, *some* discussion of the other variables might have been included. A single reference to how post-colonial immigration and the rhetoric of Enoch Powell affected British social characterizations, for example, might reasonably have been expected. Cannadine is surely right to suggest that Marxist notions of class are no longer the sole or main means by which historians attempt to understand popular perceptions, representations and identities. But this then means taking seriously not just other socio-

economic ways of dividing society — as in the hierarchical model or “classlessness” — but also the other analytical categories that historians have increasingly come to deploy in their understanding of the social order.

In sum, Cannadine’s book, while skillfully amassing an argument that seems to synthesize current trends, ends up overly simplifying and homogenizing them into his own liberal-empiricist master narrative. Moreover, the implicit triumphalism of the book towards the “discredited” paradigms of the left is not only patronizing but perhaps a bit premature. The fierce battles in the journals amongst the practitioners of older traditions of “marxist” social theory and the proponents of post-modernist, post-Marxist cultural history are not signs of the absolute decay of the academic left, but rather indications of continuing vitality. For it is the very question that Cannadine’s book claims to be tackling — the relationship between the social order and politics — which animates leftist historians, precisely because this relationship is at the root of questions of power and who gets to wield it. There may be little consensus among social historians, on the left and otherwise, over the “correct” approach to the study of history, but so long as historians at least attempt to talk to one another on matters of epistemological import, rather than blithely ignoring them as Cannadine seems to, then this lack of consensus is to be welcomed, not derided.

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¹ P.J. Corfield, “Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in P.J. Corfield, ed., *Language, History and Class* (Oxford 1991), 102-28, and “The Rivals: Landed and Other Gentlemen,” in N. Harte and R. Quinault, eds., *Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914* (Manchester 1996), 1-33; Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (Cambridge 1995), and “The New Political History: A Review Essay,” *Social History*, 21: 3 (1996), 342-54. To his credit Cannadine does indicate with his footnotes the remarkable debt he owes to these scholars: Wahrman is cited in no less than twenty three footnotes in the chapter on the nineteenth century alone (out of the 120 notes on the first half of that century), and in more than thirty footnotes in the study as a whole. Corfield, and the other contributors to Corfield’s 1991 collection *Language, History and Class*, together comprise a similar number of citations.

² See the argument developed by David Mayfield, “Language and Social History,” *Social History*, 16: 3 (1991), 353-8.

³ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge 1983); James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York 1994).

⁴ Stedman Jones, “Rethinking Chartism,” in *Languages of Class*; James Epstein, “Rethinking the Categories of Working-Class History,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (1986),

195-208; R. Gray, "The Deconstruction of the English Working Class," *Social History*, 11: 3 (1986), 363-73; Neville Kirk, "In Defence of Class: A Critique of Recent Revisionist Writing Upon the Nineteenth-Century English Working Class," *International Review of Social History*, 32 (1987), 2-47; Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1990); David Mayfield and Susan Thorne, "Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language," *Social History*, 17: 2 (1992), 165-87; Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, "The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language — A Reply," *Social History*, 18:1 (1993), 1-18; Patrick Joyce, "The Imaginary Discontents of Social History: A Note of Response to Mayfield and Thorne, and Lawrence and Taylor" *Social History*, 18: 1 (1993), 81-85; James Vernon, "Who's Afraid of the Linguistic Turn? The Politics of Social History and Its Discontents," *Social History*, 19: 1 (1994), 81-87; Patrick Joyce, "The End of Social History?" *Social History*, 20: 1 (1995), 74-91.

⁵ Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge 1991) and *Democratic Subjects: the Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge 1994); James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge 1993).

⁶ Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory* (Chicago 1984); Leanore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London 1987); Jon Lawrence, "Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914," *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), 626-52; Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London 1995).

⁷ His belief that Joan W. Scott's position in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988) supports his argument I find to be quite perverse.

⁸ For example, Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class* (London 1992); Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose, eds., *Constructions of Place, Race and Nation* (London 1993); Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, NY 1994).