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WEALTH, ELITES AND THE CLASS STRUCTURE OF MODERN BRITAIN

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WEALTH, ELITES AND THE CLASS STRUCTURE OF MODERN BRITAIN*

THOSE WHO WRITE ABOUT CLASS STRUCTURE MUST AVOID EQUALLY THE Scylla of over-simplification and the Charybdis of excessive complication. Successful interpretations of class structure must be sweeping, digestible, *à propos*, and rooted in firm statistical evidence. The failure of any but Marx's theory of class to meet these criteria is a major reason why the Marxist view of class structure has survived so long and so successfully: there are few challengers. Marx's theory of class structure and its evolution is, of course, largely an extrapolation from the British experience and, to no small extent, must stand or fall with the accuracy of Britain as the test case. In this paper, something of an alternative theory of the growth and evolution of class structure in Britain will be offered, taking as its focus the changes in and behaviour of those élites which have dominated Britain politically and economically in the modern period. Briefly, it is suggested that mid-Victorian Britain contained two middle classes, by far the larger and wealthier based on commerce and London, the other on manufacturing and the North of England. Together with the landed élite, these contested for the benefits of wealth, status and power, and evolved separate means of social control. These separate élites replaced the unified eighteenth-century world of "Old Corruption" and themselves merged, by a gradual process, into a single élite, finally formed in the period 1918-25.

In the first part of the essay is, however, an exposition of what is hoped is the firm statistical evidence underlining the later inferences.

I

"Wealthy men as a specific social group have been studied very little up to this time".¹ Unfortunately Pitirim Sorokin's remark, true

* Much of the statistical portion of this article recapitulates what is presented more fully in my "The Victorian Middle Classes: Wealth, Occupation and Geography" (forthcoming in *Econ. Hist. Rev.*). This is unavoidable, given that the evidence is original, and that the arguments which follow derive from it, and are largely unsupported without it. Earlier versions of this paper were read to Professor E. J. Hobsbawm's Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, to that of Professor A. H. John and Dr. Charlotte Erickson at the London School of Economics, and to the History Seminar at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra. I am most grateful for the helpful comments received at each. For criticism of a later version of this paper I acknowledge the help of Professor Oliver MacDonagh, Dr. F. B. Smith and Mr. M. E. J. Krygier, all of the Australian National University, of Professor R. S. Neale, of the University of New England, and of Dr. Paul Robertson, University of Melbourne.

¹ Pitirim Sorokin, "American Millionaires and Multi-Millionaires", *Social Forces*, iii (1924-5), p. 627.

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