



Information for Social Change

"an activist organisation that examines issues of censorship, freedom and ethics amongst library and information workers..."

Mind the Gap

John Pateman

“There is something peculiar about the British attitude to class, some contradiction or unease. On the one hand, we say that class is a thing of the past or rapidly becoming so... Anyone can now pass so freely from one part of society to another that the barriers, such as they are, are no longer to be taken seriously. On the other hand, we continue to ‘mind the gap’ ...” (Mount, 2004)

In my previous article [*Culture, Identity and Libraries*, ISC 21] I looked at how working class people do not use public libraries in the same proportion as their numbers in society, and what can be done to address this situation. In this concluding article I consider how working class people can be given some power and control over public libraries and how this can lead to the development of needs based library services.

In his book *Mind the Gap – the new class divide in Britain* Ferdinand Mount argues that there is a new class divide in Britain which is just as vicious and hard to get rid of as the old one. Through acute observation and vivid illustration – drawing on every aspect of life from soap operas, speech patterns and gardening to education and the distribution of wealth – he demolishes the illusion that we live in a classless society and shows how the worst off in Britain today are more culturally deprived than their parents or grandparents.

As Mount points out, and as I have found out over the years every time I have raised class as an issue within the library profession, “To reopen the whole question of class in Britain is to blunder into a mine field. Most of us find the subject painful and embarrassing. The words we have to choose from can sound patronising, crass or unkind – lower class, lower middle class, working class, let alone bourgeois or petit bourgeois. Even middle class is these days often used as a venomous synonym for smug, unadventurous or selfish.”

Mount has invented his own words for the classes – the Uppers and the Downers. He examines the experiences of these groups in terms of economic equality, lifestyle and equality of opportunity. In each case he argues compellingly, and with plenty of evidence, that none of these “versions of classlessness” actually exist. Instead we have a situation in which “the old class system has been reconstituted into a more or less

meritocratic upper tier and a lower tier which is defined principally by its failure to qualify for the upper tier. This is the new gap that we have to mind.”

Mount examines the ignorance and fear expressed by the Uppers towards the Downers through their portrayal in literature (*The Time Machine, Brave New World*) and the media (soaps and reality TV). This has helped to widen the gap between the classes who now effectively exist in completely separate worlds: “It is indeed possible for a middle class person to traverse the entire length of a blameless life without seriously engaging with a current member of the lower classes (although he or she may well meet plenty of upward achievers from modest origins). In some senses, the bottom class in England is more socially isolated than ever before in history. The exceptional visitations from the middle classes in a therapeutic role – as doctor or social worker or divorce lawyer – only serve to emphasise that isolation.”

In addition to this isolation, Mount argues that the Downers have been deprived of many aspects of their life which at one time earned them the respect of the Uppers. “For the ultimate deprivation that the English working class has suffered – in fact the consequence of all the other deprivations – is the deprivation of respect.” He traces this back to “the invention of the Masses”. This process began with the Industrial Revolution for this unprecedented massing of people led, naturally, almost unthinkingly, to the concept of ‘the masses’.

In former times there had been fine gradations between and within each class. After the Industrial Revolution there were just two classes: the “Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (*Communist Manifesto*), “the rich and the poor” (*Sybil*). The masses were invented and society was divided into two great opposing forces. But the impact of the two classes model was never simply economic. From the outset it had a devastating effect, not so much upon the mindset of those who were grouped together in ‘the working class’ as upon the attitudes and assumptions of those who weren’t. It was in the mind of the upper and middle classes that the idea of the masses really took hold – and with effects that were to prove baleful.

The assumption was that industrialisation had somehow dehumanised the working class. To rescue them the state had to step in because the poor were incapable of fending for themselves, educationally and morally as well as economically. There must therefore be a national system of education, a state system of welfare, public libraries and all the other institutions of Victorian paternalism. The working class were regarded by the Uppers as helpless and inherently stupid and this was reflected in the novels of Shaw, Wells and Gissing: “Virtually all the great modernist writers of the first half of the 20th century followed Gissing in his fear and loathing of the masses: E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, D.H Lawrence, and, not least, T.S. Eliot”.

The lower middle classes and suburbia were a particular target of the intelligentsia. “So for those born somewhere near the bottom, the going is tough. In fact the problem is more or less insoluble. If they are loud and drunk and fornicate like rabbits, they are little

better than animals. But if they are quiet and respectable and well behaved they are worse still. Either way, the intellectuals will continue to loathe and despise them”.

The working classes were considered to be immoral, godless, ignorant, feckless, infantile. And hence unable to sustain family life, utterly heathen, incapable of absorbing education, unable to look after themselves economically, and unfit to take part in politics and government. Mount looks at each of these myths in turn and comprehensively demolishes every one of them.

With regard to education, for example, he demonstrates that the Downers were capable of organising their own schooling and many of them could read and write. The Poor Law Commission in 1841 found that 87 per cent of workhouse children in Norfolk and Suffolk between the ages of nine and sixteen could read and more than half of them could write. The Committee of the Council on Education in the same year was told that 79 per cent of miners in Northumberland and Durham could read and more than half of them could write. Of the population of Hull in 1839, 14,109 out of 14,526 adults had attended day or evening school and over 92 per cent of them could read. Most of these adults must have left school before the first modest State subsidies to education began in 1833 and well before the Education Act of 1870.

The working classes organised and paid for their own education which was supplemented by Sunday schools for the children and Mechanics Institutes for their parents: “What was absorbed in the Mechanic’s Institute was very far from mechanical. Behind those dignified buildings which went up all over the Welsh valleys, in the mill towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire and behind the shipyards of the Tyne, the Clyde and the Mersey lay a cultural upsurge of the most uninhibited, energetic, idealistic kind. But it was only an intensification, a heightened version of the general thirst for education which united the clerical lower classes and the industrial working class throughout the period.”

By the time the Great Reform Bill was passed in 1832, the Mechanics Institutes, the working men’s schools and the mutual improvement societies were to be found in almost every industrial district. In Carlisle, at least 24 reading rooms were founded between 1836 and 1854 with a total of almost 1,400 members and 4,000 volumes. Such reading rooms typically offered classes in reading, writing and mathematics, taught either by the members themselves or by professional teachers who volunteered their services.

The working classes provided for their own social welfare through friendly societies and they demonstrated their ability to organise and govern themselves via the trade union and Labour movement. But much of this “civilisation of the working classes” is now largely hidden from view, buried under the ideology of social progress which is our orthodoxy and which has been drummed into us by school teachers, historians and self congratulatory politicians ever since.

Mount explains how and why so much of that “civilisation” came to be lost. The institutions of the Downers – the schools, the chapels, the Mechanics Institutes, the friendly societies – were systematically destroyed. This is no accident. The final closure

of so many working class institutions is only the culmination of a long and bitter campaign to deride and eclipse them. From the moment that those lower class institutions began to blossom, they were under unremitting attack from the guardians of the Established culture.

“Their churches have been derided and strangled, their schools and hospitals and savings schemes have been taken over by the state, they have been herded into mass housing (largely paid for by the tax deducted from their own pay packets), and in return for modest improvements in their real take home pay they remain subject to the bleak disciplines of capitalist enterprise. Their old loyalties to Queen and country – and indeed to county, town and trade union – have been belittled. In return, they are fed by the media with a stream of degraded pap which for the most part leaves them dissatisfied and feeling they have been gulled.”

The Downers of today are much worse off than the Downers of 1970 or even the 1930's. Their cultural impoverishment blots out any modest material improvements. Whereas the working classes used to have some real control over certain aspects of their lives, they are now managed by the middle classes. There is now a huge army of officials to manage the Downers including Youth Workers, Social Workers, Probation Teams, Truancy Officers and the wide range of posts to be found in a typical edition of the Wednesday 'Society' supplement of the *Guardian*.

The common assumption today is that the bottom class need to be managed. “What I do not think many people have yet woken up to is that the working class has been subjected to a sustained programme of social contempt and institutional erosion which has persisted through many different governments and several political fashions.” Instead of the undoubted affluence of the 1950s and 60s offering people in the bottom class a greater say over their lives, in some respects their lives have become more 'massified', less responsible than those of their parents and grandparents.

Mount calls his solution to this problem “unlock and allot”. The idea is simply to unlock the value that is already theoretically the property of the Downers and to allot it to them specifically by name, whether as individuals, families or voluntary groups. An allotment is an entitlement rather than an allocation. This principle can be applied to the allotment of land and services, including education, health and library services. It can also be applied to the workplace and to the appointment of public officials such as chief constables.

In the case of public libraries, for example, each resident could be given an allotment of the service, perhaps in the form of a voucher which they could redeem at their local library. This would return some real power to ordinary people and give them some genuine ownership and control of the library. They could use their allotment to ensure that the library service was fully meeting their needs.

This could have a dramatic effect on public libraries and force or encourage them to take a needs based approach to service delivery. In a recent opinion poll (*Sunday Times* 25

August 2002) more than two thirds of British adults considered themselves to be working class. Putting power and control back into their hands would give working class people a majority stake and say in how public libraries are managed and delivered.