

AN ESSAY IN BRITISH SOCIAL HISTORY :

How powerful and exclusive were the victorian upper classes ?

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ملخص :

لقد كانت الطبقة العليا خلال القرن 19 (أي أثناء حكم الملكة فكتوريا) جد مميزة وقوية. كما كانت الأفضل من الناحية الاجتماعية والسياسية، حيث أن التقاليد السياسية جد متأصلة في حياتهم الاجتماعية (لها صلة مع ملكية الأراضي). ساهمت هذه الميزة الخاصة بالطبقة العليا في المجتمع البريطاني، خلال القرن 19 على بقائها لمدة طويلة وسيطرتها في إدارة الحياة السياسية والاجتماعية. ولكن مع ظهور الثورة الصناعية، أخذت هذه الطبقة بالزوال تدريجيا، ثم بدأت في العودة مع نهاية الربع الثاني من القرن العشرين. كما تمكنت الطبقة الأرستقراطية في بريطانيا، وذلك بفضل مرونتها (عكس الفرنسيين على سبيل المثال) من التخلي عن هويتها المميزة والاندماج في المجتمع البريطاني المعاصر، تجنباً لأي صراعات طبقية. مما أدى إلى تغير الأرستقراطية التقليدية عبر سلسلة من مظاهر الاندماج والتكيف لتصبح أرستقراطية رأسمالية وتواصل سيطرتها و هيمنتها. كان هذا التغير، تغيير أدوار وليس تغيير أشخاص، إذ لم تكن هناك ثورة كما حدث في فرنسا وإنما كان تغييرا سلميا وتدرجيا.

« Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs ». (1)

« The exclusiveness of a class is strictly relative to the distance which separates it from those next below and next above ». (2)

The age-old categorization of British society into rich and poor is very meaningful if we considered the social gap that existed between the upper and middling classes on one hand and the lower ones on the other. The division is even more significant between upper and lower classes, as J.F.C Harrison points it out : « In their homes and habits and whole culture, the affluent classes, were, in many respects, as far removed from their poorer countrymen as if they had been inhabitants of a foreign land » (3) and « What a mighty space lies between the mansion of the private gentleman and the cottage of the labourer on his estate » (4)

Who were these upper classes? What sort of power undermined their dominance in national life through many centuries and their survival as a class, despite the economic and political storms that shook the whole of British society in the nineteenth century?

The old categorization of rich and poor is a rather exaggerated one, for British society in the nineteenth century was highly hierarchical.

The division:

1. Upper class
2. Middle class
3. Working class

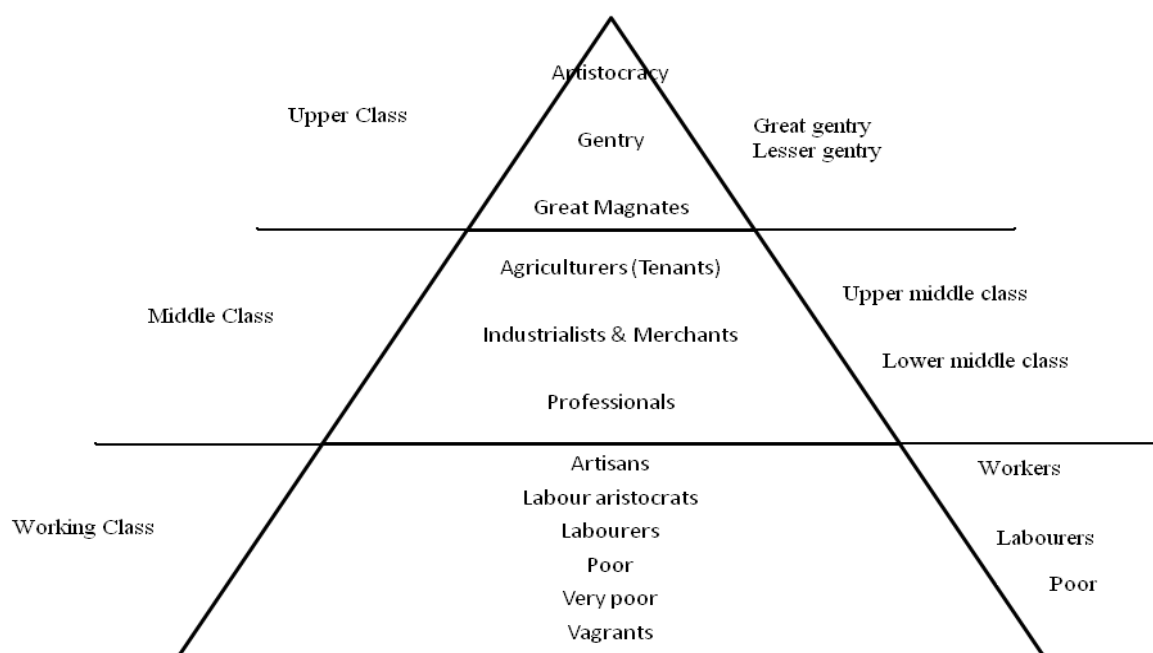
Could be split into :

1. Aristocracy – gentry - great magnates.
2. Upper middle class – Lower middle class
3. Workers – Labourers - Poor.

Which was again divided into :

1. Aristocracy
 - Greater gentry
 - Lesser gentry (squires) small proprietors (yeomen)
 - Great magnates
2. Agriculturists (tenants)
 - Industrialists and merchants professionals.
3. Artisans
 - Labour aristocrats
 - Labourers
 - Poor
 - Very poor
 - Vagrants
 - And so on.

In the abstract, English society had the exact shape of a pyramid, made of superposed layers, each layer connecting the previous with the next one ,and rendering the whole structure in the most admirable and cohesive manner .(see opp.figure)



Hierarchy of British Society in the 19th century

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Starting from the top of the pyramid to its basis, the percentage of families and the distribution of their incomes was as follows (1803):

	Families	Income
1- Aristocracy	1,4	15,7
2- Middle Ranks	31,6	59,4
3- Lower Orders	67	24,9

**These figures (5) show, what the pyramid doesn't:
the unequal distribution of the National**

Income, characterized by a congestion of a great part of the National Income and an accumulation of wealth in a few hands. It means that "the great mass of the people-the nation itself-can progress only in such fashion as is dictated by the enterprise or caprice of a fraction of the population. When we say that about one million people command one third of the entire income of the nation we mean ,broadly, that one million people have under their control the lives of one -third of the population or of 14,000,000 people. When we say that about five million people command one-half of the entire income of the country, we mean ,broadly, that five million people control the lives of one-half of the population, or of 21,000,000 people"(6).

That means that the life of the great majority of the population depended on the wealth, hence the command and control of a very small group situated at the top of the pyramid.

The upper strata comprised the Aristocracy, gentry and some great magnates. Yet, the contradiction is that a very small number of the population possessed the biggest part of the National Income, and governed all the rest of the population.

“The possessors of wealth exercise the real government of the country and the nominal government at Westminster but timidly modifies the rule of the rich”(6)

In rural England, wealth and influence in society meant landed property. Townsend, in his “Great governing families of England” (1865), defines the governing elite, simply as the owners of land.

Landed property was considered for a long period as the “real” property, the most permanent and the most secure form of property, providing institutions and forms of authority that had lasted from feudal times to modern centuries.

The possession of a landed estate had been the ambition of generations of “successful”Englishmen; it was the safest way to recognition as a gentleman, although other strict criteria, such as nobility, a certain style of life,”genility of character “...etc, were required to enter this group of “gentlemen”.

However, the main criteria were a certain amount of landownership and annual income derived from it: 10,000 acres and £10,000 at least to be a member of the Aristocracy . A minimum of 1,000 acres and £1,000 were required for a gentry membership.

The maximum of annual income could reach £50,000. Examples of great magnates such as the Dukes of Bedford, Bridgewater, Devonshire or Northumberland disposed over £50,000 a year ; for others it could as well fall below £10,000 but can be compensated for this by possession of a peerage or ancient lineage. The Earl of Clarendon, for example, whose income from land was about £3,000 a year, was compensated for this modesty of resources, by ancient lineage which ensured him of being an aristocrat in the political and social as well as legal senses of the term.

However this group had the particularity of being mobile and fluid ,and a few of the magnates belonging to it, were no more than “new comers”, such as bankers and merchants, enriched from the colonies , with money but no aristocratic noble origin .

Mobility was also exercised inside the family unit. Primogeniture and entailment made the younger sons leave the family seat, for a wider environment, seeking careers in armed services, church and law.

Another characteristic of this elite, was the active life they led, between their estates and the London Season. Their seasonal migrations account for the double forms of power they held in society: local power (counties, estates) on one hand, and political power during the parliamentary Season, on the other hand. As in the counties, they mingled with the gentry, supervising the estates management, attending the local and county affairs of magistracy, yeomanry, churches, charities and schools, so in town, they mingled with a wealthy and political world, patronizing it.

The elite formed by itself a “society “whose members could be identified by a certain standard of life. Superfluous expenditures were to keep this standard as high and as far as possible from the other ranks below them. Professor Marshall observed that “perhaps £100,000,000 annually are spent even by the working classes, and £ 400,000,000 by the rest of the population of England in ways that do little or nothing towards making life nobler or truly happier”(Principles of Economics)

The “society” was active but in a leisure way(7) Their pompous social life made up of hunting ,travelling, extravagant balls , parties, “at homes”...etc was equally joined by men as well as women and one could even argue that the aristocratic woman played a great role in social interactions. She, with ambition and a spirit of enterprise, held the key for social success of her family. In reality these parties of pleasure were used as opportunities of making friendships and contracts; and promoting a species of both political and social mobility. The circles in which London Society moved had a tendency to follow political channels and the great houses tended to attract party labels, such as Holland House for the Whigs and Cecil House for the Tories.

Country Sports, such as hunting and shooting were noble activities “par excellence”, reserved for privileged elite. Not only was it an important part in a gentleman’s life and a pattern of his gentility but also an expression of his social and political patronage. By law, shooting was restricted to the superior landowning classes. Sport was even represented in Politics. Until the end of Queen Victoria’s reign, a royal pack was maintained at Windsor Castle and the office of Master of the Buckhounds was a cabinet appointment, changing with the government. The breeding and preservation of game was a highly organized industry under the supervision of full-time game-keepers (about 3000 in Great Britain).

Game laws were strict: trespassers and poachers were severely punished. No doubt J.P.s spent more time dealing with breaches of these laws than on any other kind of offence. Game often created unpleasant feelings between landlords and tenants. The grievances were to be removed after the Ground Game Act of 1881, which authorized tenants to destroy rabbits and hares on their farms without seeking their landlord’s permission.

During the second half of the century, country games became more organized and more elaborate, thus more expensive.

Fox hunting became the great passion of a country gentleman, a ritualistic and exclusive cult.”To a master of foxhounds is given a place of great influence and into his hands is confided an authority the possession of which is confided an authority the possession of which among his fellow sportsmen is very pleasant to him. For this he is expected to pay and he does pay for it “(8). The point to be made about hunting is its effect in linking landowners with townspeople, through the so called”democracy of the field”.

The significance of land property went beyond investment and income; it meant power over others, power in politics.

Until the period that preceded the first Reform Act, the hold in Parliament by the upper class was very strong, for Government in that society was a function of property :”The principle of our constitution is the representation of property , imperfectly in theory, but efficiently in practice”.A.Young1794.

They had direct control over the composition of the House of Commons through proprietary rights of nomination and influence. At the Accession of George III, 111 Borough patrons determined or influenced the election of 205 seats(almost half the total representation of England); of these 111 patrons, 55 were members of the House of Lords or peers ,and the other 56 were commoners.

Peerage was the most powerful institution of landed Aristocracy .Being an M.P was an end in itself : for the aristocrat, a career in the House of Commons was the first step towards peerage. For the gentry, purchase of a seat, was to enhance his prestige in the county. Officers in the army and the navy were seeking for promotion; bankers and merchant for valuable contracts through their position in Parliament.

Predominance of this elite in Government affairs, was not more than the logical continuation of their power in society and more particularly in local government of their estates.

Quarter Sessions ,borough corporations, parish officers were taken by property-holders. In the counties the Lords and their deputy lieutenants, the sheriffs and the justices of the peace, were leading landowners, noblemen or squires, with an occasional clergyman or businessman, having “one foot on the hand”.

The boroughs were”governed”by an oligarchy of traders, professional men and landowners through various charters and customs.

In the parishes, the constables, church wardens, overseers of the Poor, Surveyors of highways... etc were yeomen, tenant farmers and occasionally tradesmen.

Much merit upon local affairs had been attributed more to the gentry, than to the Aristocracy. However ,if the gentry were important for their local knowledge and for linking the central authority to the local one ,they nevertheless, could be a factor of corruption in local government ,encouraged by the magnates' absenteeism: extra legal power in justices, usurpation of legislative and executive powers at quarter sessions, and assizes, power of squires who were not J.Ps,over their neighbours ,consultation of persons not on the bench before fixing wages, the 300 "improvement commissioners" who appointed themselves under private acts to improve their towns ... are examples of the gentry deviances in their powers .

One would wonder why, particularly in a country like Britain, supremacy and exclusiveness of the British upper strata, had been accepted (as being part of the natural order of things) and respected for a very long time. Because socially, rural England was held together by the bonds of deference . "England is the very type of a deferential country" W.Bagehot. The social character of deference could be accounted for the self confidence and authoritarianism of the Aristocracy,as well as their deep conviction of an inborn right and duty to lead others .

Recognition of upper class leadership by parliament and lower orders ,was also the result of pragmatic services they provided the community (charities, churches and school buildings ...)and their contribution to the economy of the country (agriculture, timber production ,quarrying, buck making, mining, iron furnaces).

So, on the whole those men who wielded power ,made decisions and conducted the business of Government in the Old Society , were those who were considered in society ,as the natural leaders, granted certain attributes of wealth ,aptitude for the great world ,and sentiments of tradition and respect.

But in the 19th century, England ceased to be a rural country."For the first time in its history, the balance of economical and political power shifted from agriculture to industry and trade and the landed interest felt threatened "(9)

Faced to agricultural depressions, landowners reacted with self confidence, deploying all their efforts to improve the situation. When prices fell, they responded with rent reductions and other encouragement to keep the tenants on the farms, at a time when urbanization was developing .They helped farmers, who were threatened by the consequences of the Corn Laws Repeal, by abolishing the local rates, providing them, with seed and giving compensation for diseased livestock. They rebuilt farm houses, new barns and undertook costly improvements such as drainage. Unfortunately ,there are times when best will in the world is challenged by bad circumstances .The harvest of 1879 was the worst of the century .The 1880s were characteristic for sopping cornfields and decease among livestock. From 1879,the Repeal of the corn Laws consequences became obvious cheap grain was imported from America and Russia so rents yielded in front of this decisive factor and so did the high farming and the old agricultural system.

If these facts marked the end of farmers and labourers; whose living depended on farming, the situation was different for landowners. The decline of agriculture did not affect their status ,for agriculture was not the only asset of their power and the only resource their large estates provided them with. Exploitation of industrial potential on their properties was a clever response to industrialization and the growth of middle classes, who they worked with hand in hand.

Although their old paternalism was vanishing, landowners adapted to the new circumstances in an admirable way: for some of them, the situation was not so new, as Professor Perkin pointed it out" they sold their souls to economic development long before the Industrial Revolution "(10)

As the demand for minerals grew in the 18th and 19th centuries, exploitation of coal and iron proved a valuable source of income for many properties.

Prominent landed families in the Midlands and the north, in Sussex and Cumberland ,such as the Dudleys , Willoughbys, Lowthers, Curwens and the Roses owed their position in society more to coal and iron than to corn and sheep.The Riddleys of Heaton and the Blagdons in North East received through coal production a baronetcy and a viscountcy, becoming owners of 10,000 acres. Lead and ironstone mining in the Pennines, Cleveland, Norwest Yorkshire, the midlands and Cardiganshire made the famous names of Blackett, Baldwin, Guest, Walkers, Crawshays...

As outlets of these minerals and farm products, ports were built by some of these owners. Other great families such as the Egertons and Gowers distinguished themselves in the field of transport .River navigation,turnpikes ,canal and railways were often financed by landowners such as lord Dudley. Those who were not directors shared the ventures as partners and shareholders. With urbanization, urban estates revenues knew a steep rise, affecting considerably the fortunes of the Grosvenors in their London West end and the Butes in Cardiff.

Warehouses and wharves proprietors did also benefit from the growth of industrial towns and urban population.

In politics also, the English Aristocracy, retained a predominant position ,despite all the political storms of the 19th Century. They amazingly survived the agricultural depression ,the Corn Laws ,the Reform Acts and the Chartist movements. One can even assume that the first Reform Act, did, on the contrary, strengthen their power as ruling elite, if this can be measured by the increase in the size of the two Houses.

It would be inaccurate to argue that the Reform Act brought no change in the structure of the traditional elite .Looking at the Reform Act clauses would enable us to measure the extent of change they brought in the political power of Aristocracy:

The 1832 Act abolished the pocket boroughs, but this did not weaken their position, they retained their hold on country seats, which increased in number.

The other clause of more importance was to give the vote to tenant farmers, paying over £40 a year in rent.

So, on the whole, the First Reform Act brought changes in the political system but it did not bring a new class into power. Neither did the further Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884. Furthermore, the new franchise qualifications were still based on property and not on manhood. Guttsman clarifies:"The government which passed the Reform Bill was paradoxically one of the most aristocratic the country had ever seen"(11)

During the fifty years which preceded the first Reform Act, the membership of the Cabinet was drawn predominantly from the House of Lords. With the Reform Act , the power of the House of Commons began to increase. But despite its growing ascendancy in political leadership ,we find little changes in the class composition of cabinet membership ;even at its most democratic ,the Cabinet contained a majority of aristocrats. For example in the 1830-68 Cabinets,68 out of 103 members were landed aristocrats and gentry ,the 35 others were mostly mercantile and administrator magnates or lawyers. In the first 50 years of the Victorian era, 10 % of new peers were from the Aristocracy or the gentry, only 7 were "new men".

Predominance of upper class membership in the Government can be explained as follows: the cost of being elected rose after 1832. In order to acquire a seat, the subject must have a guarantee of financial independence not only for himself, but also for his descendants. On the other hand, with the institution of primogeniture, wealth and privileged positions in government were passed to the eldest sons of the same families in power.

Some historians argued that this system of primogeniture was not fair in "kicking out" the younger sons .However, if this is true in politics, it is far from being the same in other institutions such as the Church, Army or Navy where Aristocrats' and

the gentry's younger sons had a strong hold; in these institutions competition was based on wealth and influence.

The other reason was corruption in the system of elections.

Pressure on farmers, evictions or threats of eviction (reinforced by the longer leases) were very common for many years, after the enfranchise of tenant farmers. Lady Charlotte Guest, a spectator of the 1837 election, commented: "the Tory landlords brought their tenants up themselves like flocks of sheep and made them brake their pledge words. They absolutely dragged them to the poll, threatening to turn them out of their farms unless they voted plumpers for Lord Adare. One man shed tears on being forced to this ". At this same election, Gladstone was accused by the Great Whig family of Grosvenor of canvassing Westminster tenants. The justification given by aristocrats was that Landlord should guide the judgment of their tenants and very often the latter were joked about for wandering here and there, eager to know the way their landlords were going to vote.

Tenants replied to the pressure: "we fear God, we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests and with respect to nobility. "Deference as well as insecurity were the instigators of their resignation and passivity. Who would have the courage to vote against his landlord's nominee and run the risk of being chased out of his farm, in those days where the secret ballot did not exist? So "the counties not only elect landowners, which is natural, but also elect landowners from their own county ". Bagehot

This sort of political intimidation was to be put under question, later in the century, as men became more politically conscious and the franchise was extended. One would have thought that the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, tenants would vote freely, but in reality they still dared not vote against their landlords for many years after, until they got guarantees of social and political independence.

"The aristocracy ... Still... administers public affairs, and it is a great error to suppose as many persons in England, that it administers but doesn't govern. He who administers governs because he infixes his own mark and stamps his own character on all public affairs as they pass through his hands..." Mathew Arnold 1861

As late as the 1860 British politics was still in the hand of Aristocracy, what Guttsman called "a traditional elite in power".

Power was also shared by the gentry who dealt mainly with local government.

It is not my aim in this essay to draw a line between Aristocracy and gentry, as some historians tried to do, I would consider them as a fairly homogenous political and social group, bound together by differences of degree.

The gentry must not be considered as a "residue "of the English upper classes and it must be given a great deal of importance for, not only was it the link between aristocrats and rural middle classes but also between landed aristocrats and farmers, in other words between the central authority and local affairs, taking an active part in management and being acknowledged as natural leaders in local government.

Justices of the Peace (J.P) were still the organ of administration in the mid-nineteenth century. The Municipal Reform Act of 1835 strengthened their power. In the towns, it put the government in the hands of elected representatives, though in the country, the parish organization was broken down and the J.Ps were the only authority. They were appointed directly by the Crown, on the recommendation of a leading landowner, and to be on the Bench was a common thing in the life of a country gentleman.

The gentry administered justice at Quarter and Petty sessions. They were also responsible for highways and bridges, prisons licensing of public houses, the raising of rates and many other matters. Their wives were often involved in running village schools and devoted much of their time on charitable works and visiting the sick.

The Settlement Act ,by electing them guardians of the Poor did not change their situation much : all J.Ps were ex-office guardians, their meetings were generally held on the same day and in the same place as the Petty Sessions.

Another important function of the J.Ps was the direction of the county police. In 1856 , a County Police Force was established in place of the old parish constables and the J.Ps had the important role of directing it . All these works were done voluntarily by the gentry. No doubt it satisfied their sense of power, on the other hand, they considered it as a duty and a right .

Later in the century , the decline of landed interests and the development of transport (particularly the railways) will change the gentry character, reducing their interests in local affairs, so that the criticism about landlords absenteeism will apply to the gentry. However their absenteeism was compensated by a more active role in political life and business.

But the second half of the 19th century was to bring fundamental changes in the history of the traditional elite and the political system of the country.

The abolition of land patronage, the rise of middle class and its upwards mobility and a series of democratic reforms were decisive factors in the end of aristocratic supremacy. The character itself changed : a shift was made from a traditional Aristocracy to a capitalist one . However one should bear in mind that all this took place under a slow process.

Legislative measures changed some aspects of the Parliamentary system. The electoral process also changed: boroughs ceased to be just “commodities” sold to the highest bidder”.In 1761, only 48 constituencies out of 315 went to a poll. In 1865 ,204 out of 401; the figure continued to rise after this date .

Also the rise of middle classes was to bring new professions and new men forward, so urban constituencies had either a local merchant or an industrialist as their representatives. The new M.Ps(members of parliament) were generally drawn from local community ,dissenting churches and political reform movements .

Democratization was more obvious in the last decades of the century. The first working class candidates were elected in 1874 (2 out of 13 candidates). After 1885, 12 sat at the House of Commons; most of them were chosen among labour aristocrats.

If the political elite used to be composed of men from a high social rank, later M.Ps or ministers were more likely to be intellectual or administrators, specialists, or industrialists. Therefore membership in the government tended towards professionalism .Moreover the Second half of the century brought a widening in the basis of aristocratic society under economic strains, if this can be measured partly by the increasing number of peers:

- In 1832: 350 peers
- In 1870: 400 peers
- In 1914: 570 peers

Thus, through peerage and the purchase of land (not that investment in land was still widely used) new men such as manufacturers, industrialists and some gentry, were progressively accepted within the inner circle in recognition of their industrial or commercial achievements. Yet, these “nouveau venus” were accepted as individuals and not as a group: in fact it took one or even two generations to “be forgiven” its non aristocratic origin.

The 1860s and the 1870s were the last golden decades of landownership. Then an “eclipse” took place .The word eclipse used by F.M.L Thompson to describe the decline of land patronage is very appropriate and expressive. In fact, contrarily to their continental neighbours, English landowners did not face a crisis, revolution or expropriation. Their supremacy declined slowly and smoothly, without humiliation. After the 1860s-1870s, estates started being sold slowly or reduced in size and it is as

late as the beginning of the 20th century, that the process was activated thus becoming obvious.

The character of the counties changed accordingly: the remaining families (mainly gentry) were not as influential and their interest turned more to their homes, parks and gardens. Also the patriarchal landowner of yesterday was replaced by the more impersonal manager.

Perhaps one of the most revealing symptoms in the decline of their life standard is the scarcity of domestic servants they faced in the late 19th century.

Urbanization and alternative employments reduced the supply of servants. Servants wages tended to rise and the whole way of life of a country house was founded on cheap labour . The great problem in maintaining domestic servants was also felt in small towns and suburbs the growing cost and rarity of domestic servants affected considerably the aristocratic life style and pushed many gentry families to move to smaller houses or emigrate towards the colonies.

CONCLUSION

“The most stable form of authority is the traditional authority”. (12)

“Class is not a thing but a happening. Class is a historical phenomenon. If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes (but simply a multitude of experiences). But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas and their institutions.”(13)

The analysis of Victorian upper classes showed how, in a country like Britain, a political career was deeply rooted in an established social position; thus social and political elite were closely identical. This accounts for the long survival of Victorian's upper class and its predominance in political and administrative life, despite the numerous and dangerous attacks it faced for more than a century. However, its supremacy was going to vanish but under a slow and discrete process, becoming apparent only as late as the second quarter of the 20th century. From 1935 to 1955, for example, only seven politicians out of seventy six in the Cabinet were aristocrats.

While losing its distinctive identity, the Aristocracy became absorbed in the wider body of the modern British upper class, thus avoiding a class conflict.

The flexible, mobile and fluid character of British Aristocracy is an important factor in its long predominance on national life. They adapted themselves to new conditions in an admirable way: through a phenomenon of assimilation, the traditional Aristocracy changed into a capitalist Aristocracy. Therefore the capitalist revolution of the 19th century was a successful one in regard to the traditional Aristocracy: it left the social structure intact (transforming landowners into a basically capitalist class); the transformation was a transformation of roles and not of persons.

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