

On the Consolation of Ideology: A Rococo Open Letter to a New York Intellectual

Dear B_____,

I hope this finds you and yours well. Thanks for sending along C's review essay on social mobility as political myth in the still United Kingdom, and here in the United States, too. It is a very good little piece, almost great. A brilliant beginning, then declines. Doesn't reach its full potential. Sobering and familiar thought, that.

Yet I can't help but note a certain wickedness on your part. Like what I need now is another review essay, about books I've not read, though I have a decent and professional idea of one of the authors under review, who in turn relies on other authors, some but not all of whom I know, well, have read a little. As a reader of C's review, at your request, and as a writer that you have chosen to distract, this is a problem. The text has begun to float. We cannot rely on passing familiarity, much less deep familiarity, and one might imagine, perhaps like Borges or Calvino, whoever they are, of reviews of books that no longer exist, perhaps never existed, were planned but unwritten, or only partially written upon the deaths of their authors, or were dreamed, maybe in a fever . . .

Thus, in a fit of whimsy I'm going to see your distracting hyperlink and raise you a text, write a review of the review you sent, without reading anything else, natch. This presents the possibility of further work: a review of a review of a review, and so on and on, reviews to the n as it were, doubtless with reference to what you may or may not have read, or read and badly remember, or feel you should have read, or perhaps cannot have read, because the texts may not exist at all (as above) or if they do nobody cares (as with my books), or knows what they mean, or . . . Levitation. I will of course expect thoughtful responses from you, since I have worked so hard on this prose, not simply sent you a hyperlink. I'm lying, but perhaps a meta text built over an abyss means something nonetheless, cultural references stretched over a bottomless (at least as far as we can see) gulf, an ever-rising verbal luminosity, escaping the earth's atmosphere and drifting off into space. Or not.

Here goes. Once again you have sent me an essay, this time from some English light destroyer class intellectual. At least you are candid enough to say you mostly want to see how I respond, i.e., you don't care if C is right or wrong about social mobility, or even what I think. You are just waving flags in front of the bull, me, occasioning performance art, or at least a charge of some sort, intemperance from 3300 meters. Frankly, I don't think this is nice. If you know that on a winter morning a scholar with much else on his plate will feel compelled to wear himself out addressing yet another essay, isn't it at least bad manners to take advantage? I know what you are doing, and it is flattering, if not all that serious, this poking with a stick.

But why can't the savvy old bull ignore the red flag? Maybe drink a sports drink, get some exercise? The sad thing is I do need to respond, not on account of our friendship or the force of the author's mind, but because of me, somehow. It's disturbing, actually, this lack of intellectual autonomy. What does that say about me? Is this merely some pathetic

attempt to imprint myself, seek “followers” (how fucking fascist). The problem with clickbait is that it is *bait*, and now I’m a fish on a line?

Evidently, and so I’ve thought about what this guy C writes. He is quite smart, I’d probably like him over dinner, and therefore I am going to say things, whether or not you listen, to organize my own thoughts if nothing else. Pathetic. A good person, like my wife, doesn’t have time for such crap, which she’s not above calling the “luxury” I have of reading so much (frankly middlebrow) media. (William Barrett said that the intellectual may be proud of an apt phrase, but sooner or later the intellectual comes to know that he has been wasting his time. Terrifying.) But she’s a woman and a professor in various senses of both words, and can hold her peace, that is, she’s not a writer (though she writes well), and that’s a good thing. I, however, for better but mostly worse, really am a writer. Slave to this sort of shit. Bring on the flags, the bull is as ready as he is going to be, and not getting any younger. And can’t stop himself, as you know, with your flags and sticks. In due course, dinner will cost you dearly. Next year in Jerusalem.

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1) C argues that “social mobility” (meaning upward mobility for the essentially deserving but unfortunately born) in the UK, by which he means England, is almost always a lie, told across the political spectrum. The Tories since Thatcher anyway have argued that England is a meritocracy, and Thatcher herself served as evidence for that proposition. Labor often argues that the nation should be a meritocracy, and will be soon. Little attention is paid to the overwhelming evidence that the social class into which one is born tends to shape one’s future, in broad outline if not specifics. Even less attention is paid to the uncomfortable fact that one person’s relative rise on the ladder is another’s fall. There is cruelty in meritocratic argument, even when wrapped in political piety, solicitude for this or that disadvantaged group. The great merit of C’s essay is to recognize that normative meritocracy may be fair but nonetheless unkind, and to begin thinking about what that might mean.

Enough of the compliments. C’s essay is fundamentally limited by its Englishness. England is a very strange place, as I’ve grown to more deeply appreciate through A, who came from modest circumstances in Birmingham or some such place, got sent to Yale or similar, and is now doing a PhD in your old stomping ground, was it Berkeley? Whatever, we are talking structure here, and the parts are modular. The point is, there is upward mobility in England, I’ve seen it. C’s fundamental point, then, that social mobility is merely a myth told to cloak some sort of injustice, is overdone. And typically so: M the American that C is reviewing is correct in saying that the English really have a hard time thinking other than through class. Not having read M, I wonder (not enough to read) if he draws the obvious parallel to so many Americans whose thinking is structured, and so limited, by race understood in specifically American ways. While the lens of class gives the English an idiom, and subtlety in otherwise banal television, not to say much cleverness best deployed after a well-oiled dinner, the class paradigm tends to limit social analysis to the old stories, more or less still true. There’s a certain crudity in the repetition. Luckily, here in the NYC of our minds, our rehearsals are hard-won and our thinking is fresh.

2) As with much "Left" thought – here again, this is crazy English, I cannot imagine a German, Scandinavian, or French writer sounding so wet – C is terribly uncomfortable with the idea of inequality as such. Or power. C is fundamentally unwilling to be reflective, or to put it theologically, to make some sort of peace with sin, which keeps popping up its head (nice imagery there) in human affairs. Of course, people look out for their families: any notion of "equality" that didn't acknowledge that would be *en route* to totalitarian. As Plato said, the Republic is a dream. So, while the language is good and some of the criticism sharp, at its core this piece is familiar, well put but not worth seriously engaging. See old stories, and compulsions, above.

3) Circling back to M the American and meritocracy working all too well in the United States, C the Englishman just doesn't get it. No, the United Kingdom and the United States are not all that similar, by orders of magnitude along multiple axes. Having asserted that the US is just like the UK, only bigger, C sees the replication of class, so that M (and the US) are doing something "English" but just without the straw hats and horse races (well, there is Head of the Charles), i.e., US talk of "meritocracy" is a fundamentally dishonest persiflage for the entrenchment of class. Lots of problems -- here again some truths obscure others. Comparison to France or Germany might have been helpful to C's essay, as would a deeper understanding of the United States.

A) Within the collection of people in a position plausibly to apply to an Ivy League school, most are from comfortable backgrounds, and there's a fair number of more or less prodigies who aren't. But that's a lot of people. The US is huge -- the 1% is 3.3 million people, and children of more than the 1% apply to Stanford and its ilk (I know, Stanford is not technically an Ivy, which is at bottom a sports conference, and Stanford actually has real sports, you know I know that, but . . .) The point is that there are plenty of players for the sort of brutal competition to which you've been witness, indeed participated in, for your entire life.

Underneath this is a notion that "talent" is a thing which is randomly distributed across a bell curve. Maybe that's true for Olympic sprinters or something, but for the vast number of social roles, as C in some passages seems aware, nurture matters. Or, one might say, education, culture. Or more pointedly, "background," one of my grandmother's favorite words. It just is not the case that without class barriers, kids from anywhere could rely on inborn talent to excel in Oxford debate clubs. And so, in a country of so many millions, not giving most people a chance to become [member of elite] does not, effectively, deprive the elite of "talent" as talent is understood in that community. So, I have sat through any number of diversity arguments along the lines that we must involve everyone because, somewhere, out there, the next Keynes is dribbling a basketball. (Keynes was indeed tall.) Tiny Norway wins disproportionate numbers of Olympic medals. Even Olympic sprinters seem to concentrate in what the biz types call centers of excellence; Jamaicans win far more medals than one would predict. Giving everybody art supplies in kindergarten will not reproduce Florence. At its heart, the putatively egalitarian argument turns on a weirdly biologically deterministic view of human success as the expression of innate qualities, rather than the product of a social milieu, years of hard work and collective social capital

devoted to what a given community appreciates, the child that would be, might be, a hero, as hero is understood in that polity. Or, more simply, education. Back to Plato.

So yeah, at scale, the US can have (i) structural discrimination; (ii) the partial replication of economic advantage; and (iii) vicious competition, all at once.

B) C fundamentally doesn't understand the stakes in affluent class discourse in the United States. M points out the importance of "wages/salaries," which is misleading because of equity compensation, and the issues raised above about being upper middle class and talented (or an acknowledged prodigy) in order to play. So, C is happy to simplify, and says American discussion of meritocracy is mere class, in the English sense, by another name. But that's wrong. What M is saying is "job" -- not in the sense of labor, which sort of derails K, but in the sense of status, location. Health care and retirement. That is, the job is more important in the US than virtually anywhere else, certainly the UK.

At least below the "family office" level of wealth, as you well know, the ability of one generation to ensure the welfare of the next is highly limited. And by "welfare" we mean jobs. And jobs, by and large, are keyed to educational credentials. (Truth and beauty be damned.) Hence the insane competition for educational credentials. As noted above, if one's rise is another's fall, and there is social mobility, as there is in the U.S., then it is quite possible to fall out of the class, to slide down the ladder. It could occasionally happen in England, too, and was so mortifying as to constitute the subject of novels and the motivation in murder mysteries. But normally, it was much more difficult for a gentleman with an income to fuck things up. Which is why one might say, with TS Eliot, that England has a class system and America doesn't -- a provocation more true today than when uttered.

That is, C doesn't begin to fathom the middle class American couple's fear of downward social mobility, for themselves but especially for their offspring. And you can see this fear in things like the closing of humanities departments, too.

C. The idea of "class" in America is really misleading. In all sorts of ways, it gets confused with celebrity. It also gets confused with the existence of the ultra-rich. And, as suggested above, it's not really internally stable/consistent enough to be of much analytic use. Not none, but not much. But if we are to discuss the culture of elites in "class" terms, caveats applied, then I would focus on the standards of the *bien pensant* top five percent, the sorts of people who read the NYT or even the LRB and write long emails like this one. We're constituting an *haute bourgeoisie* that dominates political and social discourse. Whether actual power lies with that class is open to debate. Surely wealth is concentrated higher, at least if we use the (very odd) market capitalization metric of wealth (you may recall, Watson, my monograph on _____). But apart from a fondness for flying private and mucking about in their home offices, I don't think the 0.5% constitute a politically significant and discrete class any more than the English earldom.

4) As noted, C is sensibly bothered by social mobility understood in relative terms. For you to be higher on the ladder means that someone like me is lower. That is, we can't all be

above average, except in Lake Wobegone. Fair enough. While perhaps we should think a little longer about whether society is really best imagined as a ladder, surely the image fits corporations, law firms, government and the other courtier habitats for which we train the young, see above. But is social life always zero sum? In the passage of the review that Comrade E admired, C concedes that sometimes the structure of society changes, and lots of people may get better paid jobs. Sometimes, the rising tide lifts all the boats. But that, C says, is historically anomalous.

I agree that rising tides are rather unusual, but they are also very powerful. People do not just compare themselves to other people, they also compare their current to their past situations. I traveled a lot in China back in the day, your tax dollars at work, and wondered (and sometimes discussed) whether the Chinese economic miracle would promote a sort of turning away, as had happened in Germany after the *Wirtschaftswunder*. Many people said no. Over and over again people would point to a city, usually figuratively but sometimes literally, and say, with real wonder, "I remember when that *just wasn't there*. It was rice paddies."

5) C argues that we [at least those of us who imagine our worlds as ladders] need to believe in luck, i.e., we must believe that actual social position is more or less a matter of happenstance, lest we believe that we truly deserve our fate, and are consumed with resentment, a thought our cohort is compelled to say in French, *ressentiment*. As a corollary, we might remark the appeal of political critique. I wrote a poem about this once, back when I was a lawyer in DC in the 90s:

Play in the Works

We repeat tales of merit and true worth
like "you can't keep a good man down"
steeling ourselves, to look at injustice,
to hide our fear of being thrown away.

But meritocracies need their injustices.
If we really believed that the system
perfectly matched each of us to our station
we could not abide those on rungs above
and we in turn would condemn the poor.

Over a generation later, it still seems to me that the aforementioned haute bourgeoisie is pretty much in this position. When we are feeling good about our positions, or proud of our children's achievements, then the meritocracy must be functioning well. Rest assured, your success, *mein Freund*, indeed the success of the mandarin class generally, is deserved. But in more anxious or even guilty (guilt is mysterious, but real) moods, the situation of the less fortunate must be either the result of shiftlessness or perhaps systematic discrimination, personal moral failing or social injustice, and we have rules about what can be said when.

From this perspective, much ostentatiously "critical" thought is itself a persiflage. Taking a moralistic stance against our society can help us abide the indignities of our positions, the paltriness of our lives, and yes the sufferings and successes of others. The alternative would be to accept the status quo, notably our own condemnation, as just. We need ideology, for our own sakes foremost.

Well, that's not the only alternative, but obligations call, however faintly. Thanks again.