

The scholarship boy

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FOR Mr. Hoggart, the defining characteristic of the scholarship boy is uncertainty; an uncertainty that is produced by his situation at the friction point of two cultures. By the time that he reaches university, his education has taken him out of the working class without establishing him in any other class. The process begins in the elementary school, where his abilities soon mark him out: winning a place at a grammar school distinguishes him further. At grammar school, he gradually moves away from his class. He is separated from his contemporaries by the different school he attends and by his need to spend his evenings doing homework rather than playing in the streets with them. He is separated from his home by the need for quiet in order to study (Mr. Hoggart points out that often he does not get this quiet and is forced to work in a noisy living room), and by his lack of any intimate contact with the world of his father and brothers. When he leaves school and goes on to a university, he moves into a completely different world, a world for which little serious attempt has been made to train him. He no longer has the stimulus of constant examinations to direct his efforts. He is uneasy in his attitude towards the values of his new environment. "With one part of himself he admires much that he finds in them; a play of intelligence, a breadth of outlook, a kind of style. He would like to be a citizen of that well-polished, prosperous, cool, book-lined and magazine-discussing world of the successful intelligent middle class which he glimpses through doorways or feels awkward among on short visits, aware of his grubby fingernails. With another part of himself he develops an asperity towards that world; he turns up his nose at its self-satisfaction, its earnest social concern, its intelligent coffee parties, its suave sons at Oxford, and its Mrs. Miniverish or Mrs. Ramseyish cultural pretensions. He is rather over ready to notice anything which can be regarded as pretentious or fanciful, anything which allows him to say that these people do not know what life is really like." The scholarship boy is left by the education system unsure and uncertain, with ambitions of no well-defined nature, and not enough staying power to realise any of them.

This description seems to me generally correct. However I think that within the general picture, the importance

of some of the factors have changed since the time of which Mr. Hoggart is writing, and that these may have led, in turn, to a change in the kind of person the scholarship boy becomes.

For me the process of separation did not begin until I was in the sixth form of a grammar school. I do not think that in this my experience was untypical: rather, this now seems typical of the children who began their education after the 1944 Education Act came into force, and when the conditions of the working class had been greatly improved by the establishment of the Welfare State by the 1945 Labour Government. There were more places available at grammar schools, and more children ready to take them. At the elementary school which I attended, a school which drew its children from predominantly working-class areas, at least a third of the children of scholarship age went on to grammar schools. Mr. Hoggart's scholarship boy was an outsider. In the street in which I lived (it was part of a council estate) the boys who remained at the elementary schools were the outsiders. This increase in the numbers of working-class boys going to grammar schools had an effect on the attitude of parents, who no longer made them feel odd by remarks as to how clever they were. They were still full members of the community.

Sixth form outsider

It was when I reached the sixth form that the process of separation began. Here I was in the minority: most of my friends had left school to find jobs. I no longer had any contact with them because the amount of homework I had to do kept me occupied nearly the whole of my evenings. People now began to remark on my abilities. But even more embarrassing were the people who began to ask me what I was going to do when I had finished school. They knew the value of a grammar school education, which led to a school certificate. But they did not know the value of a sixth form leading to university education, and some of them were arrogant enough to suggest that a university education was of no use. "A boy of your age should be out earning his living" was not a

phrase that I heard all that frequently, but I heard it often enough to make me uncertain of my position. This feeling of separation was heightened by the new world of culture that I discovered. For the first time I was taught to discriminate among the books and newspapers which I read, and I discovered the existence of Art and Music. It was this discovery more than anything else which highlighted the difference between the world that I was leaving and the new world that I was entering. Any attempt to discriminate between newspapers and wireless programmes met at home with the charge of being snobbish. And this charge bred an unpleasant feeling of contempt in me for people who made it.

Middle-class assurance

When I came to university (and I am speaking here about Oxford, and I suspect that what I have to say does not apply to any other university, except perhaps Cambridge) my education and the culture I absorbed were driving me from the working class towards the middle class. But Oxford halted this drive. Since his cultural equipment is the thing that most differentiates a working-class boy from his home when he is at school, he is to a certain extent over-conscious of his cultural equipment when he comes to university. But the people whom I met, predominantly middle class, were much better equipped, culturally, than I was. They regarded literature, music, art, with the certainty that comes from an assurance of the place these activities have in the scheme of things. They had begun earlier than me; they had read more books, seen more pictures and been to more concerts. And there was the crude fact that most of them had more money to spend on these pursuits than I had. For all these things I envied them in the way that Mr. Hoggart describes in the passage quoted above. But these things did not go alone. With them went many values that I disliked intensely: the easy acceptance of their position in

life; the lack of any conception of what life was like for the great majority of people. It would not be strictly accurate to describe all these people as "phoney": but only by a deliberate refusal to see some things could they accept many of the advantages they possessed without any feeling of guilt.

The results of this situation, as described by Mr. Hoggart, certainly hold for me. My education has made it very difficult for me to go back to the class from which I come: though, unlike him, I do not feel uncomfortable with working-class people. I cannot go back because many of the things that interest me and some of my values find no place in working-class life. Identification with the middle class is a no more attractive prospect, for the reasons I have already given.

Much of what I have written has been straight autobiography. But I think that a comparison of my experiences with those described by Mr. Hoggart enables three conclusions to be drawn: (1) It is dangerous to underestimate the effect of the welfare state on the working class. The difference between my early experience and his can only be explained in terms of the effects of the Welfare State. (2) The most important thing about "class" for the scholarship boy is not economic privilege, but the attitudes that characterise particular classes. (That is why *Look Back in Anger* is important for any description of class consciousness in the 1950s). (3) The reason for the divorce between the working class and the intellectual can be more clearly shown. Since one of the characteristics of the intellectual is his interest in culture, it is not surprising that he feels separated from a class which has no place for this in its way of life and is often actively hostile to it. If the central thesis of the *Uses of Literacy* is right—that working-class culture is losing many of the things which made it valuable under the impact of the mass media—this divorce is likely to become greater. For this reason cultural change should be the immediate concern of every socialist.