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The Critique of the Establishment

Definitions

In the British case the term Establishment has a specific meaning, beyond simply ‘those in charge’, ‘the highly paid’, or ‘the upper class’. The British Establishment is better defined as a small and flexible group of people able to renew itself by drawing on the ranks of an increasingly technocratic and aspirational middle-class. In this understanding of the term, the Establishment was subjected to a strong cultural critique during the period under question here, around 1956–1962, in a way that generated serious national challenges to the revived consensualism coming after the Second World War. The core of the Establishment is a small, connected network, not all of whom come from the ‘estated’ ranks of long-accumulated capital, but all of whom are willing to stand behind the instrumental interests of state capitalism. Its interconnectedness rose with the mature period of imperial administration: in 2002 Robert Colls quotes Sidney Webb’s 1886 observation that the group of people capable of making meaningful political decisions amounted to 2000 Londoners (Colls 2004: 90) – also exactly the figure given by Tom Nairn in the same year (Nairn 2002: 1–14). An awareness of the protean nature of this vestedness, however, booms in the 1950s with the technocratic opportunities offered by a new Welfare State. Peter Oborne, perhaps known best for his coruscating 2007 attack on the political class, quotes A.J.P. Taylor in 1953 on the acceptance of the British Establishment, which
talks with its own branded accents; eats different meals at different times; has its own privileged system of education; its own education; its own religion; even, to a large extent, its own form of football. Nowhere else in Europe can you discover a man’s social position by exchanging a few words or breaking bread with him.

(Oborne 2007: 25–26)

The example of A.J.P. Taylor is instructive, not only for his timing of a definition of this group which leads into late 1950s critique, but also because of his decision to abandon his apparently more highbrow BBC TV appearances for the series *Free Speech* on commercial television in 1954–1955, leading to his extraordinary noteless lectures of 1957–1961 which cemented his position as a dissenting public intellectual (Irwin and Lustgarten, 1955–1961). Oborne’s own definition, perhaps seeming in the context of a narrow British party-political context as anti-Labour and so of the right (a misleading caricature: New Labour had already long belonged to the authoritarian-right), remains one of the most telling attempts to describe how the 2000s Establishment would be covertly strengthened by new levels of bureaucracy, technocracy, quangocracy and audit. Oborne’s attack in fact echoes an explicitly leftist class critique of the Establishment arising during the period of Taylor’s fame, a period which also saw the tightening of the grip of state-Keynesian economics and the power nexus of the capitalist state. After a period of jubilation over health and education provision and what seemed to be a concentration on shared British values, what became increasingly clear in the mid-1950s was how the management of social mobility was not quite the same as more social mobility – and how old modes of control were reasserting themselves in new ways. It was during this period, and the ‘decline’ phrase that followed, that the Establishment became identifiable – and critiqued – as a discrete group, as did their ability to adapt and absorb members and norms.

In part, threats to the Establishment arose through the way the Welfare State had become a victim of its own tendency to create a partially educated working class realising the terms on which they were being co-opted, as can be seen in the fiction of the time. Moreover though, the unwritten constitution started to become exposed by the way the interconnectedness of political and cultural powers could be seen in an era of mass communication: cinema, mass literacy and