The Upper Classes: Visibility, Adaptability and Change

This chapter addresses the representation of the British upper classes and the mediation of their social practices and values. In doing so it seeks to explore the ways in which the upper classes are accommodated and condoned within an unequal society despite the often-repeated conviction that success should be achieved through merit both within and also across generations. For some readers, a chapter on the upper class might seem less than pressing, as there is a perception that this social bracket is rather small (perhaps being confined to those with titles, for example) and therefore without significant economic or political power or even cultural influence. This view is entirely understandable, because the upper classes in Britain are indeed small in number (even when the non-aristocratic rich are counted; see Abercrombie et al. 2000:183). They can also be rather oddly invisible except in their most institutionalised, ceremonial and archaic of forms; that is, in the shape of the monarchy, those with titles and their social set and through the annual publication of Honours Lists and the like. Indeed, since the second half of the twentieth century at least, the aristocracy and what has been referred to as the landed gentry (those land-owning classes who could live off the income of their estates) have been portrayed as a dying breed. They have been seen to struggle to adapt to social change; juggling the economic pressures of maintaining stately homes and country houses or turning to trade with work in business, in the City of London, and so forth. Moreover, the post-World War Two years have witnessed a decline in class-based deference for the aristocracy and even for the royal family (Rosen 2003:39–40). Depictions of turmoil and social dysfunction in the royal family during moments of media exposure, such as those seen during the 1980s with the marriage and separation of the Prince and Princess of Wales and the Duke and Duchess of York, also served to
undermine, if only in the short term, popular notions of the centrality and relevance of the royal family to national life.

Having said this, it has nonetheless been argued that overall the media, which are mostly under upper-class (albeit non-aristocratic) ownership, continue to depict the upper classes as non-threatening or even as beneficial to British life, business and culture (Roberts 2011:177). When the media do choose to debate their role more questioningly they still do so in the context of mass, mainly uncritical coverage of the monarchy, which, in itself, ultimately underlines rather than undermines the continuing importance of the upper classes to national life (Blain and O’Donnell 2003:30). Moreover, there is far more diversity and political weight to the British upper classes in terms of their contribution to British life, culture and the economy and to its political institutions than these reports of royalty, both major and minor, would suggest. The upper class is in fact far broader, more variegated in character, more resilient and more stable than might be assumed from its depiction in the media. As Ken Roberts (2011:169) explains in his informative overview of the modern upper class, the current upper classes are the product of the blending of old (aristocratic) and new (business) money which was realised during the nineteenth-century industrial period and which continues to this day (see also Anderson 1992:19). Also, it is worth noting that, while the aristocracy are no longer at the core of this influential stratum, their influence still extends well beyond the pomp, ceremony and provision of elegant backdrops which help fuel the tourist, movie and fashion industries. As Roberts (p. 172) notes, there are few sociologists who doubt the presence of a separate and distinctive upper class, and this category is characterised not only by its exceptional wealth but also by its ability to both consolidate and also to renew itself as a social group. In other words, it has a remarkable continuity precisely because its members do not form an entirely ‘closed group’ but incorporate others who have become seriously wealthy, primarily through business and other originally middle-class enterprises. Thus, entrepreneurs such as Sir Richard Branson and Lord Sugar, global politicians such as Tony Blair, bankers and financiers, media conglomerate owners and even prominent figures from the entertainment and fashion industries such as Sir Paul and Stella McCartney could now be regarded as upper-class alongside the ‘blue blood’ royals and other titled elites (Harvey 2005:31).

So we might say that the upper classes now are constituted of a diverse range of the idle rich, the famous, the charitable, the titled and the industrious. Entertainment celebrities rub shoulders with social