



# The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain

*David Cannadine*

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Although it is widely believed that the British are obsessed with class to a degree unrivaled by any other nation, politicians in Britain are now calling for a "classless society," and scholars are concluding that class does not matter any more. But has class -- once considered the master narrative of British history -- fallen, failed, and been dismissed? In this wholly original and brilliantly argued book, David Cannadine shows that Britons have indeed been preoccupied with class, but in ways that are invariably ignorant and confused. Cannadine sets out to expose this ignorance and banish this confusion by imaginatively examining class itself, not so much as the history of society but as the history of the different ways in which Britons have thought about their society.

Cannadine proposes that "class" may best be understood as a shorthand term for three distinct but abiding ways in which the British have visualized their social worlds and identities: class as "us" versus "them;" class as "upper," "middle," and "lower"; and class as a seamless hierarchy of individual social relations. From the eighteenth through the twentieth century, he traces the ebb and flow of these three ways of viewing British society, unveiling the different purposes each model has served.

Encompassing social, intellectual, and political history, Cannadine uncovers the meanings of class from Adam Smith to Karl Marx to Margaret Thatcher, showing the key moments in which thinking about class shifted, such as the aftermath of the French Revolution and the rise the Labor Party in the early twentieth century. He cogently argues that Marxist attempts to view history in terms of class struggle are often as oversimplified as conservative approaches that deny the central place of class in British life. In conclusion, Cannadine considers whether it is possible or desirable to create a "classless society," a pledge made by John Major that has continued to resonate even after the conservative defeat. Until we know what class really means-and has meant-to the British, we cannot seriously address these questions.

Creative, erudite, and accessible, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* offers a fresh and engaging perspective on both British history and the crucial topic of class.

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