

## The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010

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**Reviewer:** Sean Ledwith

Few cultural commentators would feel brave enough to identify a particular month and year when human character underwent a significant transformation- the novelist Virginia Woolf had no such reservations. According to her, December 1910 marked one of these distinctive turning points. Woolf's reasoning – if we can call it that – was based on her awareness of an alteration in the demeanour of her cook. During that month, Woolf was taken aback by the appearance of that particular employee in her drawing room, asking to borrow a newspaper and requesting advice on a hat. Such unseemly conduct, Woolf reflected, would not have been tolerated by an earlier generation. This is just one of many revealing vignettes recounted by Selina Todd in her powerfully written social and political history of contemporary Britain, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*. Unlike Woolf, Todd delves beneath the surface of the everyday to unearth the structural changes in the economy and the shifting dynamics of political power that have affected the fluctuating fortunes of the social strata of British society throughout the 20th century and into the first two decades of the 21st. Todd also unashamedly writes from the perspective of those at the bottom of the hierarchy and with a conviction that those at the top are responsible for the stubborn persistence of inequality: 'Those who won wars, who got an education against the odds, who fought for better rights at work, and who worked hard to give their children the best possible start only to see them joining dole queues emphasize that life has not always been thus, and that it can change again' (p. 10).

Todd's study is full of timely reminders of the reality of the daily grind for millions of British workers throughout the last century. She highlights the fact that in the year that Virginia Woolf bemoaned the erosion of submissiveness on the part of her cook, 'domestic servants constituted the largest single group of working people in Britain' (p. 14). Modern television dramas such as 'Downton Abbey' and 'Mr Selfridge' have played a pernicious role in glossing over the grim drudgery this form of work frequently demanded from hundreds of thousands forced into it by the lack of an alternative. Todd quotes a 15-year girl in West Yorkshire recalling how no task was considered too menial by her employee: 'I even had to take his shoes off and put ... his slippers on' (p. 25). Virginia Woolf was not alone as a member of the upper echelons expressing her disapproval of the deviant conduct of the lower orders. Todd cites a letter to the *Scotsman* newspaper from this era in which an anonymous source expressed outrage at the latest craze: 'Motoring at night I hear, is one of the latest amusements ...' (p. 22). Not the least of the strengths of Todd's book is the analytical blow-torch she applies to eras of British history that are sometimes presented by those in power as

aspirational models for us today. The Edwardian era is one such supposed paradigm. Todd notes how it has been described by one historian as 'a long garden party on a golden afternoon' (quoted on p. 15). That phrase might accurately capture the mood of the elite but for the majority of British workers it was a period marked by upheavals such as Home Secretary Winston Churchill sending armed troops into a Welsh mining town, a six-hour riot outside Parliament sparked by the Suffragette campaign, and the Bloody Sunday strike in Liverpool (p. 14).

This wave of unrest from below was only temporarily halted by the outbreak of the First World War. The conflict marked an undoubted watershed in British social history. Todd notes how at the outbreak of war, there were about half a million women and nearly four million men signed up as trade union members; by the end of the conflict those figures had jumped up to one million and seven million respectively (p. 31). Another refreshing feature of her narrative is a regular puncturing of the myth that Britain's numerous military adventures have been greeted, for the most part, with mass outpourings of patriotic fervour. She recounts an amusing episode in Luton at the end of the First World War in which the mayor had attempted to make political capital of the victory celebrations by staging a parade for returning veterans. Unfortunately he had not factored in the seething anger of the soldiers who were returning to near-certain unemployment: 'The mayor spent the evening hiding in his darkened parlour rather than enjoying the sumptuous banquet the council had planned. In the early hours of the morning he was smuggled out of town disguised as a special constable' (p. 35).

Incidents such as this form part of Todd's explicit project of demolishing 'the myth that the British are essentially a moderate people whose differences ... are less important than a shared interest in peaceable, law-abiding governance' (p. 58). Inevitably, her account of the 1926 General Strike is further ammunition for this cause. She persuasively argues that the government of the day was ruthless and unrelenting in pursuit of its objective of utterly defeating the strikers. Todd notes how Churchill (who plays an unfashionably villainous role throughout the book) greeted the strike with undisguised glee as an opportunity to smash the unions (p. 48). He was also authorised by Prime Minister Baldwin to produce a daily newspaper that was little more than a mouthpiece for government propaganda but was also the only one readily available for the duration of the strike. The Archbishop of Canterbury wanted to issue an appeal for both sides to negotiate but the BBC obeyed Baldwin's instruction to forbid such an appeal until the TUC had totally capitulated (p. 54).

The defeat of the strike was the prelude to the further misery that would be inflicted on the working class in the form of the Great Depression that unfolded in the following decade. As we are currently enduring a not dissimilar era of state-induced austerity, Todd does not hold back on noting the parallels between the 1930s and the present. Then and now, she contends there 'was a persistent assumption made by the powerful and privileged that the wilful idleness of the poor caused poverty' (p. 62). Like the Edwardian era, the popular conception of the 1930s today has understated the full impact of economic downturn on the lives of many working class Britons. Todd soberly notes that in that decade the maternal mortality rate actually bucked the overall downward trend of the 20th century and rose by 22 per cent. The poor predictably were hit the hardest by this degradation of living standards; in the middle of the decade, working class areas recorded 10 maternal deaths per 1000 live births (p. 85). Characteristically, the response of the powerful to this hidden crisis was to blame the victims. Todd cites a 'Times' editorial from 1934 which blamed 'the ignorance of many young mothers' for their increased risk of death during childbirth (p. 86). The author, however, does not merely chronicle the grim litany of fear that gripped the bulk of the population during periods of economic contraction. Todd is alert to the cultural outlets that were frequently created by working-class Britons throughout the century as a means of counter-acting the austerity from above. The 1930s, for instance, witnessed millions of workers and their families flocking to dance halls, the cinema, gramophones and holiday camps such as Butlins as sanctuaries from the impact of government neglect.

The cynicism generated by the harsh measures of the state in the 1930s, Todd argues, fed into significant levels of underwhelming support for the wave of patriotism expected by the elite upon the outbreak of the Second World War. She reflects that there was considerable evidence that in the first year of the conflict 'many British workers weren't sure that Nazi tyranny would be any worse than the poverty trap they had

already endured in the name of democracy' (p. 122). The myth that the war was characterised by the elision of class distinctions as all strata of British society pulled together in the face of a common foe is systematically dissected by the author. Again, she effectively utilises oral records from those who lived through troubled times to shed light on neglected corners of social history. She recounts the experience of a seven-year old evacuee from Liverpool who found himself confronted with the reality of class prejudice in the midst of war: 'We were put in this churchyard as a group ... People came around and picked you like they were picking dogs out of pet shops'. A Liverpool University survey confirmed this perception that upper and middle class hosts were most likely to treat evacuees with minimal sympathy (p. 134). Despite the persistence of snobbery, Todd argues the war had a progressive impact on British society primarily through the generation of a meaningful conceptualisation of 'the people' as a source of identity and allegiance. The necessity of enrolling the physical and emotional support of millions of workers in the cause of total war led the state to begrudgingly condone the inculcation of a sense of the greater good to justify the sacrifice of lives and conditions. As Todd puts it, 'the legitimacy of social inequality was constantly, if subtly challenged by the war effort'. In view of 'the increasingly heroic positions that working class soldiers, munitions workers and thrifty housewives assumed in both press and propaganda', it was no longer tenable after 1945 to argue that the lower orders should know their place (p. 140).

The author is uncompromising in her critique of the economic policies of successive Conservative governments throughout the 20th century but if the reader is inclined to assume Todd is therefore an apologist for the Labour Party, her chapter on the Attlee government of 1945–51 would quickly dispel such an idea. Todd acknowledges the crucial legislative programme of the first majority Labour government in terms of its iconic achievements of founding the NHS, expanding the welfare state and free state education for the majority of pupils. However, she adopts a critical view of Attlee and his senior colleagues for not going further in their project of eroding the stranglehold of the elite on the levers of power. In particular, she articulates a powerful case that it would have been in the long-term interests of the 'people' if there had been an even more rigorous confrontation with vested interests, particularly in the spheres of health and education. Todd contends that 'government policies simultaneously constrained people's power in ways that provoked popular frustration. Labour's front bench was not committed to political equality' (p. 152). Some quarters of the British left have tended to look on the Attlee years through rose-tinted spectacles, understandably to some extent in terms of what came afterwards. Todd, in contrast, provides a refreshingly sceptical balance-sheet albeit from a sympathetic perspective.

Along with 1945, Todd suggests 1979 should be perceived as the other watershed date in modern British social history. The election of Margaret Thatcher is explained as a decisive policy shift to the right in much the same way that the Attlee era represented the high tide of the ideology of the left. Todd cogently recounts the familiar effects of 18 years of Conservative rule under Thatcher and Major: the deregulation of the financial sector and the promotion of a culture of credit and debt; the precipitous drop in trade union membership from over 12 million to just over 10 million; and the use of unemployment as a weapon of labour discipline, rising at one point to over 10 per cent (p. 320–1). Todd performs another useful corrective to the prevailing narrative, however, by arguing that the impact of Thatcherism on British social attitudes has been exaggerated and that, in fact, left-of-centre inclinations were stubbornly resilient throughout this era. She notes that in the year Thatcher stepped down, '51 per cent of adults thought that the government should redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor; 58 per cent believed that the government should spend more on welfare benefits' (p. 335). Todd rejects the notion that there was an inevitability about Thatcher's numerous victories over the forces of organised labour during the 1980s, most notably the miners. She argues the latter 'had a real chance of winning; Thatcher herself appeared to waver that summer' (p. 325).

Inserted between the chapters outlining these and other key moments in British social history, Todd devises 'Interludes' based on the life of the famous pools winner, Viv Nicholson, who hit the headlines in 1961 with her declaration that she would 'spend, spend, spend'. Todd justifies these sections on the grounds that 'Viv's life offers, in magnified and glamorized form, a version of what happened to the working class' (p. 9). Although these passages are readable as descriptions of an ordinary person who experiences extraordinary luck (initially, at least), they add little to our understanding of the wider forces at play in society and, to

some extent, undermine Todd's underlying message that collective struggle has been the means by which 'the people' have carved out improvements in their quality of life. These are the least convincing chapters of an otherwise outstanding narrative.

For the paperback edition released this year, Todd has added an afterword, bringing her account up to the present and including her baleful view of the Cameron-led coalition. This provides a fitting coda to her uplifting narrative and incorporates an analysis of five myths which she argues politicians past and present have permitted to obstruct the development of a more egalitarian society. These include ideas that are grimly familiar not just from her chapters on previous eras but also from today's tabloid headlines: 'The economic crisis was caused by the welfare state' (p. 374) and 'Working-class people's opportunities are blocked by women and immigrants' (p. 383). In this powerful final section, Todd re-affirms her conviction that the focus of the historian should be on the future as much as the past: 'If the past teaches us anything it is this: if the people want a better future, we can, and must create it ourselves' (p. 408).

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