

# CLASS STRUGGLE ACCORDING TO GEORGE ORWELL \*

By  
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Usually, “class struggle” is thought of as a struggle between the rich and the poor. But there is another model that I find far more realistic. In his famous work *1984* [1] **George Orwell** has included a book within a book called “The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism by Emmanuel Goldstein.” Chapter 1 of that work is titled “Ignorance is Strength” and there it is observed that “there (always) have been three kinds of people in the world, the *High*, the *Middle*, and the *Low*.” Orwell goes on to say that revolutions are not the actions of the *Low* against the *High* but those of the *Middle* against the *High*. Both groups try to obtain the alliance of the multitude of the *Low*. If the *Middle* succeeds in obtaining the alliance of the *Low*, a successful revolution occurs. On the other hand, the *High* can forestall revolutions by turning the *Low* against the *Middle*.

In the sequel I am going to use different terms for two of the categories. *Ordinary* rather than *Low* because *Low* has a pejorative connotation. And *Skilled* rather than *Middle* to avoid confusion with Middle Class.

In the medieval societies the *High* were the nobles who were also the big landowners. The *Skilled* consisted of merchants and entrepreneurs, elite troops, and, generally, people with skills. The rest of the population were *Ordinary*. The *High* tried as much as possible to have the people of the *Skilled* from outside the country or marked in some way as outsiders. The Swiss Guards of the Pope is one surviving example of the once widespread practice of using foreigners as imperial bodyguards. Allowing education only for monks and nuns (who could not have legitimate children) had a similar motivation.

The most difficult *Skilled* group to control is that of the merchants and entrepreneurs. One “solution” is to have the merchants and entrepreneurs (entirely or mostly) members of a distinct (minority) population. Such a composition can be assured by discouraging members of the majority population from acquiring an education or engaging in certain activities and leave those activities open only to a minority group. In Europe, the most significant such *Skilled* group has been the Jews, but in the Ottoman Empire (that ruled most of the Middle East for over 500 years) it also included Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and Christian Copts (in Egypt). **Bernard Lewis** provides examples of the results of such a policy in his book *The Middle East* [2]. He mentions a list of 40 private bankers in Istanbul in 1912. It included 12 Greeks, 12 Armenians, 8 Jews, and 5 *Levantine*s, people of Western European origin. A similar list of 34 stockbrokers included 18 Greeks, 6 Jews, 5 Armenians but no Turks.

Because the Ottoman Empire survived until 1922, we have detailed knowledge of how the majority of the population was kept in the dark. Education was the responsibility of religious authorities and in the early grades Muslim children were taught to memorize the Quran rather than how to read or write. As a result, most Muslims were illiterate. Jews, Greeks, and Armenians were educated properly and filled the needs for skilled people. But as religious minorities, they did not pose a threat to the regime. To make sure that most Muslims were uninformed, the printing press was banned in 1485 with the excuse that printing of Arabic characters was sacrilegious. However, a Jewish press was approved about 20 years later, on the condition it prints only texts in the Hebrew alphabet. An Armenian press was approved in 1567 and a Greek one in 1627, each limited to the

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\* This essay is the same (except for minor editorial changes) as Section 3 of “American Weakness.”

respective alphabets. It was only in 1727, almost 300 years after the invention of the printing press, that printing in Turkish with Arabic characters was allowed.

The book *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* [3] by **Thomas Sowell** contains a long chapter titled *Are Jews Generic?* Sowell observes that “Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Ibos in Nigeria, Marwaris in Burma, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and Lebanese in a number of countries” had similar “economic and social roles” as the Jews in Europe. He has coined the term “Middleman Minorities” for such groups but he does not discuss the reasons for their existence. He attributes their success to their work ethic, but he does not say why the majority lacks such an ethic. Of course, an alternative explanation is that the majority was not allowed or discouraged from acquiring the needed skills for the professions practiced by the minorities.

In the United States the *High* consists of the very wealthy people who influence politicians through their campaign contributions and other donations. A lot has been written about the “top 1%” but that group is much bigger than the *High*. According to [4] the top 1% consists of families with take home income over \$400,000 and the top 0.01% of those with take home income over \$10,000,000 (about 16,000 families). The *High* is best identified with the top 0.01%.

In most developed countries, as well as in the United States, the *Skilled* consists of affluent people with high skills that are essential for the society such as high-ranking civil and military officials, professionals (physicians, engineers, lawyers, etc.), merchants, and entrepreneurs. In the United States the annual income of most such people would place them in the top 5% (income above \$150,000) but not in the top 0.1% (income above a million and a half). The rest of the population is *Ordinary*.

Here is another way to see why it is wrong to define *High* as the top 1% rather the top 0.01%. Consider three individuals:

*Tony* (annual income \$60,000, close to the US median),  
*David* (annual income \$500,000, a bit over the 1% threshold), and  
*Nelson* (annual income \$11,000,000, a bit over the top 0.01% threshold).

*David* earns \$440,000 more than *Tony*. But *David* earns \$10,500,000 less than *Nelson*. So, the income gap between *Nelson* and *David* is more than 20 times the income gap between *David* and *Tony*. It seems logical that *David's* interests should be closer to those of *Tony* than to those of *Nelson*. You can also think of the travel modes of these three: when *Tony* travels, they fly coach, *David* flies first class, and *Nelson* in their own private plane. Again, *David's* experience is much closer to that of *Tony* than to that of *Nelson*.

Unfortunately, for *David*, there is a downside to their proximity to *Tony*. *Tony* may not be aware of *Nelson's* existence and it is unlikely they will ever meet. But *Tony* is well aware of *David*. For example, *David* may be their family doctor. The end result is that any resentment *Tony* has against the “rich,” it is going to be expressed against people like *David*. The *Ordinary* may resent the *Skilled* (the top 1%) because they are people they know.

We should keep in mind that other factors besides income determine who is in each one of the three groups. For example, some members of the *Skilled* may be quite wealthy or powerful but because of their religion they are not part of the *High*. Examples include the much maligned “Jewish Bankers” and the “Tax Producers” of the

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Ottoman Empire. A Tax Producer was responsible for imposing and collecting taxes in a province and, after taking his cut, send the funds to the emperor (the sultan). This was an enormously powerful position and it was “handicapped” by giving it only to non-Muslims. (I have some direct knowledge of the Tax Producers in the Ottoman Empire. The father of my maternal grandmother held such a position and so did his brother and their father.)

### Notes

- [1] George Orwell 1984, Secker & Warburg, 1949.
- [2] Bernard Lewis *The Middle East, A brief History of the last 2000 years*, Touchtone, 1995.
- [3] Thomas Sowell *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, Encounter Books, 2005.
- [4] For the specific numbers I rely on the following post:  
G. E. Miller “The Top 1% and Income Inequality in the U.S.” January 2019,  
<https://20somethingfinance.com/the-top-1-percent-and-income-inequality-united-states/>