

ONE

Introduction: snobbery and why it matters

... the disdain of the cool Mac user for the PC plodder, Prince William's friends' hilarity when they found that Carole Middleton kept her tomatoes in the fridge, the fact that people who post pictures of their lunch on social media are generally looked down on by those who don't.¹

This quotation from a short piece by Rosemary Hill in the *London Review of Books* neatly illustrates both the abiding fascination of snobbery and the way in which it routinely intervenes into everyday conversations, as well as the variety of ways in which snobbery may manifest itself. Other examples provided by Hill, in a piece that is less than a page in length, include Anthony Powell ('the snob's snob') and his insistence that his name should be pronounced 'poel', and the hierarchy of modern British universities.

Almost inevitably, I find myself asking the question asked by Virginia Woolf: 'Am I a snob?' Until very recently I was a 'PC plodder', although my partner has a Mac and usually manages to conceal her disdain. I have little interest in the practices of Prince William, Carole Middleton and their friends (but is this an example of 'inverted snobbery'?). I do tend to regard the practice of photographing meals a little odd, and I am prepared to allow myself that small sliver of snobbery. And perhaps the reader may consider me to be a bit of a snob in quoting from the *London Review of Books* and referring to Virginia Woolf in that academic, name-dropper sort of way.

Snobbery

Clearly there is enough to fascinate here, as I have discovered when I told other people that I was writing a book on this topic. Examples of snobbery, or alleged snobbery, abound in all areas of social life. And then there is the added complication of inverted snobbery – of, say, claiming to prefer James Bond films (and preferring Roger Moore over Daniel Craig) to Tarkovsky. Further, an accusation of snobbery may not always be taken negatively. Under certain circumstances, to claim to be a snob oneself is equivalent to claiming that you are someone interested in maintaining standards.

Latham² refers to ‘snobbery’s curious pleasures’, and this is certainly reflected in the quotations that deal with snobbery that can be found in reference books. The tone is frequently light and humorous, and there is the unspoken assumption that the members of the audience or the readers are not supposed to take the remark, however superficially shocking, all that seriously. Snobbery, at this level, is a bit like gossip: something that is subject to formal disapproval but widely practised and enjoyed.

If this were all that could be said about snobbery, then it is doubtful whether this book would find its way into a series of social science books. I might provide a series of quips, put-downs and snubs rather on the lines of Matthew Parris’s entertaining book on ‘scorn’.³ At best, I might provide a footnote to Goffman, exploring some of the less savoury aspects of the ‘presentation of self’.⁴ But I want to suggest that while what I have written up to this point is undoubtedly part of snobbery, it is not all that there is to be said, and more serious matters are at stake.

As an illustration of the more serious side of snobbery I have only to cite an article that, co-incidentally, appeared in the same issue of the *London Review of Books* that included the short piece quoted above. William Davies, writing of the British Home Office, writes:

One former Home Office official told me that the Home Office has long been identified as the voice of the working-class inside Whitehall, and feels looked down on by the Oxbridge elite in Downing Street and the Treasury.⁵

Clearly, this kind of snobbery, or perception of snobbery, can have more far-reaching consequences than the other examples cited so far. It can, perhaps, influence the formation of public policy. More generally, the idea of an educated, middle- or upper-class elite that cares little for the everyday concerns of hard-working families is a theme that has played out in various ways over the past few years. It has been played out, in Britain, in the course of the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the outcome of the referendum on Brexit, on leaving the European Union. Elsewhere within the United Kingdom, it has been a theme of discussions about divisions within the Labour Party, where the supporters of Jeremy Corbyn have been constructed as London-based, left-wing intellectuals who are geographically and politically at some considerable distance from members of the working class in the north of Britain or Scotland. Across the Atlantic, similar themes of snobbery and the distance of a Washington-based liberal elite were present in the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. I explore some of these concerns further in Chapter Six. The point I wish to make here is to argue that these kinds of discussions have apparently emerged with greater intensity in recent years, but that a common element in all of them is the idea of some kind of elite detached from and looking down on a substantial section of the population as a whole. Sometimes the word ‘snobbery’ may be actually used. In all cases, there is the common idea of ‘them’ looking down on ‘others’ or ‘us’, and this idea of ‘looking down’ would seem to be part of the popular perception of what snobbery is all about.

Snobbery, then, is important in that it has entered some of the most important political debates in recent years, especially those associated with the rise of ‘populist’ movements. I shall discuss this aspect of snobbery in more detail later. But snobbery is also important at a more interpersonal level. Snobbery matters because of the numbers of people who can recall being ‘put down’, directly or indirectly, in some social encounter or another. To give a small personal example, I can still recall the discomfort I felt when being told that ‘almost anybody’ could get into Hull University, which happened to be the

university I was about to go to. As I shall show later, much recent literature on social mobility includes similar kinds of recollections, ranging from barely disguised put-downs to more subtle senses of exclusion and difference. Snobbery, in these kinds of contexts, is one of the ways in which class differences are expressed and reproduced. It may sometimes be vague and difficult to pin down, something in the social atmosphere, but it is the atmosphere of distinction.

What is snobbery?

Snobbery is one of those practices that everyone can recognise and talk about but – perhaps – finds it more difficult to define. I shall not provide a single or simple definition at this stage, since that might unnecessarily constrain the discussion. However, in exploring some of the difficulties in defining snobbery we come closer to discovering some of the key themes that will be elaborated later.

One of the earliest and most quoted definitions of a ‘snob’ is scarcely a definition at all. In the mid-19th century Thackeray wrote: ‘He who meanly admires mean things is a Snob.’⁶ This does not help the reader to identify a snob or the practices of snobbery, although it does make it clear that snobbery is not something to be approved of. The full meaning emerges only as the reader works his way through the satirical portraits presented in Thackeray’s *Book of Snobs*. But it does point to something that indicates a change in the meaning of snobbery over the centuries. Thackeray’s snob ‘admires’ or looks up; the modern snob is more frequently seen as someone looking down.

Roughly 100 years later, Virginia Woolf asked herself ‘Am I a snob?’ The nearest she comes to a definition is when she writes:

The essence of snobbery is that you wish to impress other people.⁷

Again, the emphasis is one of ‘looking up’ rather than looking down. Virginia Woolf confesses to being impressed by titles and coronets and she seeks to impress others through her acquaintanceship with people who have titles:

If you ask me would I rather meet Einstein or the Prince of Wales, I plump for the Prince without hesitation.⁸

I shall have more to say about Virginia Woolf's memoir a little later.

Turning to a more modern definition (in this case the one supplied by Wikipedia), we find that 'a snob is a pejorative term for a person who believes that there is a correlation between social status and human worth'.⁹ Presumably, a snob does not simply believe this in abstract but also is a person who in some way lives out this definition, although, according to the definition, that could still be by either looking up or looking down. However, the definition goes on to add: 'The term also refers to a person who judges, stigmatizes others and believes that some people are inherently inferior to others ...' Here, clearly, we have the idea that the snob is someone who looks down on others.

There is clearly some kind of shift over the centuries in the definition of a snob; a shift that I shall explore in more detail later. However, there are some common themes running across the years. In the first place, snobbery clearly relies upon some kind of hierarchy whereby some people or practices are ranked as being higher or lower than others. We can also say that this is not just a personal ranking system (as when, for example, one sibling ranks him- or herself higher than another) but is social, and to that extent exists outside purely personal orderings. In modern societies, snobbery is chiefly important because it is related to class differences, although other social distinctions also play their part.

In the second place, snobbery is relational. It requires a person who makes a particular claim, and another about whom that claim is made. I may make a claim to be part of the Duke of Omnium's social circle (on the grounds, say, that I attended the odd garden party), but this claim may not be recognised by the Duke himself. In more modern times I may make remarks about 'chavs' or 'Essex girls', referring in this case to generalised others rather than to identifiable individuals. This is a different kind of relationship to the ones already cited, and different again to the

situation where there is a direct snub or put-down on the part of one person in relation to another.

Already we can see a range of complexities emerging. A snob may be snobbish in relation to broad groupings or categories (Virginia Woolf's 'coronets', or 'chavs') or in relation to specific individuals (the Duke of Omnium or my neighbour). Snobs may have their noses in the air or they may look down their noses. The practice of snobbery requires some tacit agreement as to the field of comparison. An academic snob with a fine sense of the distinctions within British or American universities requires an audience consisting of others who also understand that such distinctions exist and can be consequential. This reference to audiences reminds us that snobbery can be part of the 'presentation of self',¹⁰ but the material of snobbery may also be part of a wider area of public or semi-public discourse.

At various points of this discussion I shall use (slightly tongue-in-cheek) the term 'snobscape'. This refers to some collective understanding of where snobbery might be a relevant consideration and how this might be evaluated. In a society formally committed to democratic values, for example, snobbery may be officially disapproved of even where it is actually practised. A 'snobscape' may include a range of claims and counterclaims, accusations and denials. It may include stated oppositions to snobbery and inverted snobbery. While individuals may have their personal snobscapes, they are drawing upon wider shared discourses within a particular social context.

What is to follow

It can be seen from what has been said so far that the theme of snobbery is played out on two levels. The first level is the most immediate. It refers to the cuts, the snubs, the put-downs and the sense of exclusion felt by those who are on the receiving end of snobbery or who feel that they are in this position. It is likely that most readers will be able to recall experiences of this kind. Or, possibly, they may recall examples where they are seen as the snob or as having participated in practices that might have been perceived as snobbish.

An autobiographical example may be illuminating here. A group of us, formerly in the same year at a grammar school, had gathered at a pub one summer's evening. Some were already at university, while I, having opted to do National Service first, was about to go to Hull University. I don't remember much of what took place but I do remember that quite a bit of the discussion revolved around art-house films that we had seen. I thought that my friend, Bob, looked a bit out of things, although he attempted to make a contribution by reference to the short film *The Red Balloon*, which had been widely shown as a supporting film.

Bob's career had taken a different turn to those of most of the rest of us. He did not stay on in the sixth form but instead spent two or three years in the Merchant Navy. We had maintained contact for some time and it was at one of our meetings that he recalled the recent reunion at the pub. In a roundabout way he quizzed me about that gathering and what I felt. Slowly I came to realise how the reunion must have seemed to Bob: a group of slightly pretentious young men displaying their cultural capital. Bob had clearly felt out of that gathering and, in fact, that subsequent meeting was the last time that I saw him. Later, I heard that a member of the committee of the Old [Name of School] Association had been sharply rebuffed by Bob when it was suggested that he might join.

There are several interesting themes running through this anecdote. The first is that it refers to a group of former grammar school *boys* (the school was, in fact, co-educational, but I am certain that there were no girls present at that gathering). Pupils at grammar schools had been selected through an examination at the age of 11. Although, in theory, grammar schools were not supposed to be socially superior to the alternative secondary modern schools ('parity of esteem' was the phrase used), in practice things were rather different. And there was a strong expectation that pupils, having passed the '11-plus' examination, would stay on in the sixth form and progress to university. This particular school had a list of former pupils and the universities they attended displayed on the walls of the main assembly hall. I suspect that Bob's leaving at the earliest possible age in order to join the Merchant Navy was not part of the official script.

Differences in educational experience play an important part in the story of British snobbery, as we shall see.

Second, if any one of the boys attending that reunion had been directly accused of snobbery they would almost certainly have rejected it. Bob, they might have said, was being too sensitive, that was the last thing that had been intended, and so on. It took me a little while to recognise what Bob was talking about, and the fact that I did see his point perhaps reflected the fact that I had done National Service prior to my going to (the rather inferior) Hull University. I, too, had a slightly detached status in that group, although not as much as Bob.

Much modern snobbery, I would suggest, has this rather vague, indefinite character. There are no direct put-downs, no overt expressions of superiority. It is something that emerges in the loose collectivity of boys gathering in the garden of a pub on a summer's evening. It is the atmosphere of distinction. And yet, vague and unintended, it is still something that can be felt, acutely, by someone who feels on the receiving end. In using the term 'atmosphere' here I am greatly influenced by Jennifer Mason's discussion of 'socio-atmospherics', where she seeks to 'convey a sense of the enigmatic, complex, felt-experienced and emanating effervescence that seems to me to be the stuff of personal life and living'.¹¹

This, then, is one sphere of snobbery; the kind of world explored by Goffman,¹² a world of presentations of selves and performances. But also a world of embarrassments and discomforts. In order to understand these encounters that go wrong we need to look beyond the immediate face-to-face.

Snobbery, it is apparent, relates to hierarchies, to social structures that exist and persist outside the actions and experiences of any one individual. Broadly speaking, we are referring to class distinctions, and hence moving into one of the most central but also one of the most troubling areas of sociological analysis. It is a troubling area because, while there is little doubt that persisting and extensive social inequalities exist, there is considerable debate as to whether the language of class analysis is adequate to capture some of the complexities of these inequalities. What is clear, however, is that class and understandings in class terms have not gone away and still,

perhaps increasingly, form part of public discourse. If we consider the way in which phrases relating to the ‘white working class’ or to ‘Westminster/Washington elites’ readily entered into the analyses of the Brexit debates or the election of Donald Trump in the United States, we can appreciate that class analysis, in some form or another, has not left everyday political and social discourse.

What is relevant for the present discussion is that these social distinctions are more than a simple social mapping of inequalities in a modern society. It is not, even, simply a matter of the unequal distribution of life-chances in terms of wealth, health and education, although these are clearly of great importance. It is also that these distinctions are played out in terms of everyday, relational practices, and hence connections are made between the more abstract terms of social analysis and everyday experiences.

Hence we can say that, starting from everyday snubs or diffuse senses of exclusion, we can move outwards to more remote, more structured, more persistent patterns of social inequality. But equally, starting from the persisting facts of class inequalities, we can move, through practices, to everyday social anxieties. The importance of snobbery is the way in which it enables us to think more deeply about social inequalities and why they matter.

In the chapters that follow I aim to explore the complex interplay between social distinctions – deep and persisting – and everyday experience through, first, elaborating a history of snobbery. I make a distinction between ‘snobberies of position’ and ‘snobberies of possession’. In Chapter Two I concentrate on the former. In Chapter Three I focus more specifically on snobberies of possession and this leads, in particular, to consideration of the interplays between different kinds of capital as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu¹³ and others.

These two chapters provide the basis for the analysis in Chapter Four of the varieties of snobberies that can be found in modern society. Here I explore such themes as the embodied character of snobbery and the relationships between snobbery and material culture. However, as I have already suggested, concentrations on the rich complexities of everyday snobberies may sometimes obscure the deeper significance of snobbery.

Hence, Chapter Five, in some senses the heart of the argument, looks more directly at the relationships between snobbery and social class, looking more specifically at the work of Mike Savage and his colleagues.¹⁴ I shall also pay special attention to education and social mobility.

I have already mentioned how snobbery, or perceptions of snobbery, has entered into recent political debates. This is the subject of Chapter Six, where I develop the idea of ‘social dramas’ to show the part that snobbery plays in mobilising political sentiments. In the final chapter I bring the discussion of snobbery back to where it started, in everyday experience and everyday life. I consider some of the everyday ethical aspects of snobbery¹⁵ and how, through family and other relational practices, snobbery becomes part of taken-for-granted understandings. I also explore the way in which snobbery may exist in a society that formally disapproves of such practices.

Coda: am I a snob?

When Virginia Woolf asked, in the presence of fellow members of the Bloomsbury Group, ‘Am I a snob?’, she provided an answer that might, with the benefit of hindsight, be seen as rather evasive.¹⁶ As I have already noted, she concludes that she is a snob because of her liking for ‘coronets’, her pleasure in associating with titled people. This is close to the earlier understandings of the word, but it can be argued that the wit with which she presents her confession takes any sting out of her owning up to being a snob. It is seen as a relatively harmless aberration rather than a life-time’s obsession. And, in so doing, she may be seen as deflecting criticism away from a possibly stronger charge, that of intellectual or cultural snobbery.¹⁷

Thus, I might confess to some minor snobberies in order to evade some more substantial accusations. Thus I have joked about, or shared in jokey conversations about, certain foods such as pot noodles, wines such as Bull’s Blood or certain holiday destinations. I have been entertained by the women’s fashions sometimes on display at Crewe station at the time of Chester Races, and I inwardly wince when I hear someone say ‘cynical’ when, I think, they mean ‘sceptical’. And there are times when

Introduction

I share Noel Coward's complaint about the 'wrong' people travelling while the right ones stay at home. In my defence of these and numerous other snobberies, I might say that I don't think that these fleeting sentiments put me in a position of permanent superiority over these 'others'. Moreover, when I have these thoughts or give expression to them there is a little puritan inside me that metaphorically raps me over the knuckles. In some cases, indeed, I might be rejecting a former self that enjoyed the delights of cheap wines and fast foods.

However, as a life-long academic, am I more likely to be open to the more serious charges of intellectual or cultural snobbery? Is it my relatively privileged position in society that leads me to reject the views and practices of a Donald Trump or a Nigel Farage? Is seeking to discover or even to maintain high standards of political debate or cultural production merely snobbery or simply a desire for the best? Do these claims of snobbery obscure, perhaps deliberately, the substantial political concerns about democracy and honest political discourse? And is it moral relativism even to ask these questions?

[Find out more about David Morgan's *Snobbery* on our website.](#)