

John Baxendale. *Priestley's England: J. B. Priestley and English Culture.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. vii + 213 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7286-4.



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What is cultural authority? It is still common to make a simple assumption that there exists a single cultural hierarchy, pretty neatly correlated with education and social class, down which authority flows. While the rise of cultural pluralism, the mass media, and various cultural populisms since the 1960s has disturbed this common assumption, it remains very potent and often quietly operative behind the scenes—for example, in ritual obeisances made to the work of Pierre Bourdieu on “the aristocracy of culture,” which was based on empirical work dating back to the 1960s, in a highly centralized French educational system where education and power might have been unusually closely correlated, and in which it is taken as axiomatic that the “dominant” classes simply have “more” cultural capital than the middle and working classes.[1]

Not the least of the virtues of John Baxendale’s wonderful book is that it reminds us how misleading this set of assumptions is if applied even to earlier phases in the emergence of mass

culture. Writing explicitly against Bourdieu, Baxendale reconstructs through the work of J. B. Priestley a thriving middlebrow culture which had considerable authority of its own. Operating through mass circulation newspapers and magazines, book clubs, and ultimately radio and cinema, Priestley produced and disseminated forms of modern culture that were in no way inferior to the modernism of Bloomsbury, Marcel Proust or James Joyce, and in many ways exercised greater cultural authority. Their idiom was “realist,” in recognizable descent from Victorian forms, but infused with new accents that gave them a new depth, a new significance, and a new audience—a greater populism, a developed social conscience, a widely distributed national purchase (taking “England” as the nation in question), and also “a deeper mystery and symbolism” (p. 61), employing a miscellany of devices ranging from melodrama to satire to formal experimentation.

Organizing what is essentially a comprehensive survey of the work around key themes—class,

nation, modernity, war, futurity--Baxendale systematically demolishes a set of myths that have been used (by modernists and postmodernists alike) to diminish or condescend to Priestley in the past. Far from being a rural nostalgic, Priestley is reinstated as a defender of urban civilization who in some respects wanted more "modernity," not less. He certainly wanted more suburbia--"after a social revolution there would, with any luck, be more and not less of it," he wrote in *English Journey* (1934)--and, whether or not we have had the kind of social revolution he envisioned, he was right about the triumph of suburbia. Though he was undoubtedly nostalgic for the Bradford of his Edwardian youth, he used this pocket utopia cannily and consciously to argue for a classless society and "a cleaner, tidier, healthier, saner world than that of nineteenth-century industrialism" (p. 110). His "nostalgia" was highly unstable and polyvalent--he could use it to come to terms with change or to critique it; to expand the range of social possibility or to narrow it; to enrich his symbolism or, as in his uses of time travel, to develop his experimentalism. His Englishness was pretty inclusive--it had to be, his livelihood depended on it--though he was least interested in London (the alleged source of cultural authority in the single-hierarchy model). He *was* a critic, and in that sense an "elitist," but in the way that all polemicists, teachers, and artists (he was all three) must think they know better. He was a populist critic of popular culture; a social democratic critic of the working class; "Little Englander" critical of the old and the new empires, the British and the American. Thus he actually shared some modernists' elitist criticisms of the cinema, but from a very different standpoint, comparing the cinema unfavorably to the music hall or football as popular entertainment, and yet he was also prepared to roll up his sleeves and make it better. And when he drew attention to the provincial girls who "carefully modelled their appearance on that of their respective favourite film actresses thousands of miles away in Hollywood,"

he was not moralizing. "You may say that you do not want young women in the country to look like film stars. Possibly not, but--and this is the point--*they want to look like that, and what they want they get....* The world is more amusing than it was. This is partly because fewer and fewer people are sunk in hopeless, oafish drudgery, leading dreary lives, and looking like ugly, discontented slaves" (p. 113).

I have nothing but praise for this book. I agree with almost every word of it, but I like to think that even those who will disagree with it--who may feel it is too generous to Priestley (especially the later, more embittered Priestley), or to interwar mass culture, or to his relationship with his audiences--will appreciate its humanity, its craft, its insight, and its scrupulousness. And surely it must stimulate thought on the location and operations of cultural authority. In a characteristically deft comparison of Winston Churchill's and Priestley's broadcasting styles in wartime, Baxendale argues that Churchill's distinctive *de haut en bas* rhetorical style had "a huge impact, perhaps not despite but because of its sheer distance from the lives and habits of the people he was addressing"; yet Priestley's distinctive populist rhetorical style worked its own magic "to produce a discourse in which the people and the nation were one" (p. 147). How do we decide with whom authority lay? And how might we assess the degree to which the cultural capital of people like Priestley inflected the authority (or even the culture) of people like Churchill, and not only vice versa?

Note

[1]. See especially *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

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