Chapter Eight

The Straw Man of the Age

A Review of Hugh Thomas (ed.), The Establishment

One of the ways in which societies avoid the reality of dissidence and revolt is by encouraging imitations of rebellion. The licensed rebel is encouraged to huff and puff a great deal, both satisfying himself and annoying the less discerning defenders of the status quo. But the more intelligent conservatives know very well that the provision of straw men to be attacked is a useful device to divert attention from the more important social targets. The latest straw man in our society is the concept of ‘the Establishment’. ‘The Establishment’ has had a curious history; it first appeared on as the malign force that tried to protect Mrs Maclean from the press. Since then it has proliferated until now Hugh Thomas has edited a collection of essays in which the connections of the Establishment with the public schools, the Army, the Civil Service, Parliament, the City and the BBC are discussed. The quality of the essays varies enormously, from the engaging brilliance of Simon Raven on the officer caste, where the form of autobiography is used to convey a serious piece of social analysis, to the turgid mutterings of Henry...

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2 Thomas (ed.) 1962.
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Fairlie about the BBC, where the form of social analysis is used to convey a bad-tempered piece of one-sided polemic. It was Mr Fairlie, of course, who first popularised the phrase in print. He complains bitterly that its original meaning has now been lost to sight. By doing so, he helps to bring out the very different ways in which ‘the Establishment’ has been used and in which it is used by the contributors to this book. At least three meanings have been distinguished and every one of them is politically unhelpful.

First of all, it may simply refer to ‘the powers that be’; as such it could serve no special purpose, for it would tell us nothing about who exercises power in our society and how they do it.

Secondly, there is the meaning which Mr Fairlie originally intended to give it: ‘The idea of the establishment is concerned less with the actual exercise of power than with the established bodies of prevailing opinion which powerfully, and not always openly, influence its exercise.’ The members of the Establishment do not represent established interests or power blocs; or, if they do, this is irrelevant to their membership of the Establishment. It ‘has roots in no class and no interest’.4 Who are the members of this mysterious rootless group? Vice-Chancellors, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Governors of the BBC, the Warden of All Souls – these appear in Mr Fairlie’s Honours List. At once it is clear that, in Mr Fairlie’s sense, the Establishment is a mythological creature. It just is not there. For the members of this group can be divided into those who certainly have their roots in class and interest and those who equally certainly have no strong influence upon the exercise of power. The Governors of the BBC are among the former and the Warden of All Souls is among the latter. Mr Fairlie helps to undermine his own contention by pointing out how sensitive throughout its career the BBC has been to the demands of established authority.

The third sense which can be attached to ‘the Establishment’ is that which Mr Thomas editorially sanctions. ‘The word “Establishment” simply indicates the assumption of the attributes of a state church by certain powerful institutions and people; in general these may be supposed to be effectively beyond democratic control.’5 Mr Thomas’s own development of this sense is so

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3 Raven 1962.
4 Fairlie 1962, p. 186.
5 Thomas 1962, p. 18.