Ruling Class Men

Money, Sex, Power

von
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Chapter One

Biography, Autobiography, Life History

Very few people have more money than they can possibly spend in their own lifetime. It is hard to comprehend what it must be like to be able to spend $3 million on yourself every week of your life and still remain incredibly wealthy. According to Australian political commentator Robert Haupt (1989: 14), this was the fate of Australia's richest man – media magnate Kerry Packer. The Forbes *Rich List* for 2005 ranked Packer at 94 of the 691 billionaires in the world, whose combined wealth amounted to US$2.2 trillion (Nason, 2005: 8). According to the Merrill Lynch and Capegimini (2005) Ninth Annual World Wealth Report, there were, in 2004, 77,500 people in the world with at least US$30 million in financial assets, and David Smith (2003: 128) estimates that the richest 200 individuals in the world have the combined income of 41 per cent of the world's people.

William Davis (1982: 152), in his book *The Rich: a Study of the Species*, argues that the rich are concerned to 'make and unmake' political leaders in order to 'secure new territories or conditions favourable to their enterprises; to gain personal advancement; or just for the hell of it', but 'the basic aim has remained the same: to make the world the kind of place *they* want to live in'. Their power today is immense, indeed 'awesome', says William Shawcross (1992: 559), biographer of international media magnate Rupert Murdoch, a man who, with a few others, effects the lives of millions by not only shaping the foundations of the twenty-first century but by owning them too.

Ben Badgdikian, a former Dean of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, believes that:

> The lords of the global village have their own political agenda. Together, they exert an homogenizing power over ideas, culture and commerce that affects

> populations larger than any in history. Neither Caesar, nor Hitler, Franklin Roosevelt nor any Pope, has commanded as much power […] (Shawcross, 1992: 465, 55).

A member of the ruling class, comprising between 2–5% of the population, is in Karl Marx's (1867/1976: 254, 739, 989) phrases 'the personification of capital', 'capital as a person', or 'capital endowed in his person with consciousness and a will'. In order for the market to function at all, important decisions must be made by individuals about how, where, and in what to invest; about what constitutes a reasonable rate of return; and about how to deal with those people, organisations or governments who might impede the unceasing movement of profit-making. In making these choices these people, while in some ways being cyphers of the market in that the market works through them, are not detached from it, for the principal determinants of the class in which they live are the vast productive resources which they own, individually and collectively. Not all the men of the ruling class make these decisions, for many quite happily leave that to others, but all of them share in the benefits and in the culture which celebrates and affirms their rites of accumulation.

However, as prolific as the sociological analyses about class continue to be, often these remain within the now very tedious and old argument over class boundaries – who's in what class and why. Or they continue to focus on classes as analytical categories, missing the sense of class as a lived social relation. Certainly, they mostly ignore the salience of class for gender relations – and *vice versa* – and lack any detailed consideration of those whom the class system most benefits.

During the 1990s, perceptive and solid empirical work that met some of these *lacunae* included Gretchen Poiner's *Gender and Other Power Relationships in a Rural Community* (1990), an ethnographic study of the Australian rural township of Marulan in New South Wales (NSW); Michael Pusey's *Economic Rationalism in Canberra* (1991), which was a study of the top bureaucrats of the Australian Government's Senior Executive Service in Canberra; and Drew Cottle's (1998) historical snap-

shot of the denizens of Woollahra, Sydney's wealthiest suburb. Poiner (1990: 59, 64, 168) found that the large landholders in her study were quite clearly differentiated from the rest of the community and were, in fact, much less committed to it. Class consciousness among the 'ordinary' citizens of the area was 'muted and suppressed' because, with such high levels of home ownership and even more who aspire to own large acreages, vast landholders were regarded as 'just like us' in the sense of owning – in their cases rather big – bits of soil.

Poiner's book (1990: 183) and Penelope's *Out of the Class Closet: Lesbians Speak* (1994), have shown how gender relations are critical in 'conferring and defending' the class system. O'Lincoln, in 'Wealth, ownership and power', (Kuhn and O'Lincoln, 1996: 5) has made what he calls 'a broad brush portrayal of the ruling class', and the Research and Documentation Centre for Contemporary History of Brazil has been undertaking a study of what it calls the contemporary Brazilian 'elite', revealing it to be part of a cohesive community with its own forms of reproduction and self-perpetuation (de Camargo, 1981: 193, 194–195).

It is these approaches to class that we wish to develop in this book by looking at the lives of ruling-class men over three generations, both through their own eyes and through the eyes of those close to them. Like Poiner (1990) and Penelope (1994), we intend to situate gender more centrally to the issue of class power rather than keep it on the periphery. Although it is impossible to discuss the two main genders separately, of course, this is not a book about ruling-class women. Susan Ostrander, in *Women of the Upper Class* (1984) and Joanie Bronfman, in *The Experience of Inherited Wealth: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (1987), have already made substantial progress in this regard and we believe that it's time sociologists took a closer look at the masculinity of the hegemonic, and sharpened up our use of the term 'hegemonic masculinity' in the process (see Donaldson, 1993 for more of this). 'Kerry's a bloke', says Packer's biographer, Paul Barry, with a 'big black hole inside him', adds his ex-friend, Phillip Adams (Hawley, 1993: 10).

Apart from the need to do something with the sociology of power, other than study those who don't have much of it and express a voyeuris-

tic curiosity about those who do, we also have a keen interest in developing the historical materialist project. As one quite wealthy man, Frederick Engels (1890/1975: 684), remarked more than a hundred years ago: 'History proceeds in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills and every one of them is in turn made into what it is by a host of particular conditions of life'.

It is the 'particular conditions of life' of ruling-class men such as the Packers, Murdochs, Kennedys and Windsors, that we are concerned about in this book. We want to see how the world seems to those who benefit from rather than pay 'the enormous price tag of history' (Marks, 1989: 47) and, of course, to have a go at solving that great conundrum, the extent to which men of great power have some insight into the mechanics of its influence (Hill, 1995: 9). Do they really comprehend what they do? Are they really what Manning Clark (1991: 16) has called 'the Ha, Ha men […] not distinguished […] for their sensitivity to another man's pain'? Do they understand the negative effects their actions often have on people who are not like them? Is this merely something with which they learn to cope, or do they actually grow to enjoy it?

In confronting these mysteries, we hope to unravel the patterns of socio-structural relations underlying the daily processes of the lives of filthy rich blokes; to identify their contradictions (if we can); and to appreciate their dynamics. That is, we want to uncover these patterns by regarding the lives of men 'who live them, who are put in motion by them and who, in turn, make them work and maintain them throughout time' (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1981: 169).

Individuals' lives are the place in which societal changes are played out and the actions of individuals make up the history of which they are part. 'A political economist might be satisfied with unraveling exploitation and capital accumulation' but a sociologist has to 'show what such a relation of production does to men's and women's lives' (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1981: 171–172). In this endeavour, Elder (1981: 83) has argued that the interpersonal world of family and household are a set of linkages between class position and individual personality. We think this is wrong. Family and household and their complex gender dynam-

ics are constitutive of class relations, exist within them and are one of the key means of their historical continuity. We are hoping to dissolve the dichotomy by which most sociologists place 'structure' 'outside' people, and we hope that this may be possible by examining the lives of those in whose beneficence the social system seems, sometimes almost exclusively, to operate. It is, after all, not so hard to see the social system as somehow separate from, over and against, those it dispossesses. And so, perhaps, it may be possible to see how this system operates 'inside' those it benefits, by exploring the patterns of practice in which they immerse themselves and through which they create the social logic that underlies their own lives.

The Good Old Rule

For these reasons it makes sense to look at those who make and benefit from the rules and those whose self-image and experiences are the dominant cultural models. That is, we want to understand how what Poiner (1990: ii) has so eloquently called, after William Wordsworth, 'the good old rule' by which 'they should take who have the power and they should keep who can', actually works; how those who benefit from this 'simple plan' get to do so; and how this benefit is transmitted through time, across the generations.

The difficulties we face in pursuing this goal are basic and profound. 'Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me,' said F. Scott Fitzgerald (quoted in Thorndike, 1976). When J.P. Morgan died he left an estate of US$68 million and an art collection worth US$50 million. 'And to think', exclaimed Andrew Carnegie, 'he was not a rich man!' (Thorndike, 1976: 13). Was Carnegie joking? How would *we* know? That, quite simply, is the problem in a nutshell.

Perhaps, more precisely, this is just one part of what is really a dual problem. Unlike William Shawcross, one of Rupert Murdoch's bio-

graphers and himself an Old Etonian, the son of a Lord and a former British intelligence officer (Nelson, 1992: 9), as a couple of Australian academics we have plenty of distance from the object of our study – really rich men. We are, quite simply, not of *their kind.* This, surely, is a strength. Yet lack of empathy with those whom one studies has long been seen as problematic by many sociologists and anthropologists, and by historians such as Eleanor Hancock, who is critical of the biographer Ralf Georg Reuth for his 'attitude of detachment towards his subject'. He is 'unsympathetic', she writes, and his biography 'gives little sense of Goebbels the man' (Hancock, 1995: 9).

Elspeth Probyn's (1993: 40) injunction that validity and its usefulness must always be tested 'on our own pulses' is one we have always taken seriously, but our pulses still race uncontrollably when we realise that the money Kerry Packer blew in one weekend at the races would, at our current wages, take us 55 years – more than our whole working life – to earn (let alone to save) and that during a three day splurge in Las Vegas he gambled away an amount which would have taken us more than four of our life times to earn using chips each of which was worth more than our homes (Walker, Conway and Southward, 1993). Empathy, in this situation, is elusive. The other side of this is, of course, that even when empathy is present, it's not without its own problems. William Shawcross was attacked in London's *Literary Review* for 'having fallen in love with Murdoch' and in both the *New Yorker* and the *Independent on Sunday* he was accused of being 'seduced' by him (Hicks, 1992: 2; Henderson, 1992: 13). After John F. Kennedy's assassination, the whole Kennedy family was idealised in so many overwhelmingly positive biographies that these became known collectively as the 'Camelot School' (James, 1991: 22). Clearly, too much empathy is a pitfall as well.

In a nutshell, this is our dilemma: distance means that the prospects of ethnography, participant observation, 'in everyday life the chance meetings along a country road […] participation in informal social events from dinner parties to handwork sessions, and in formal affairs such as meetings of local organisations' (Poiner, 1990: 3) are simply not possible

for us. As for interviews, such as the 215 undertaken in Pusey's (1991: 33) Canberra study mentioned above, we lack the cultural capital, political clout, economic resources and social contacts to find ruling-class men who might want us to listen to them.

Michael Gilding (2002) and Richard Walsh (2002) have, however, usefully produced studies of very wealthy men using interview methods. Gilding secured interviews with 43 men and 7 women identified in the *Business Review Weekly* Rich Lists as each having over $60 million in wealth. Of the fifty, however, only 16 were of second and third generation wealth. Three-quarters of the sample wished to remain anonymous, which makes it difficult to corroborate their claims from other sources. These are busy as well as powerful men, and Gilding did well to garner an average of an hour and a half of their time.

Walsh had been a senior News Ltd executive in the late 1980s, and already had useful contacts with the class. He approached twelve chief executive officers of public companies, of whom four declined, including Rupert Murdoch and Australia's second-richest man, Frank Lowy. His interviews were about the same length as Gilding's. While useful, such methods do not usually deliver the depth and richness of ethnography and life history. Those who have successfully studied the ruling class with such methods, notably Susan Ostrander (1984) and Joanie Bronfman (1987), have either been part of it, or have had an *entrée* to it, which meant that their interviews were lengthy, relaxed and insightful. Bronfman, whose family is known by Conrad Black (1993: 165), has already refused an offer to publish the results of her PhD study.

Quite simply, Kerry Packer, or anyone like him, was not going to want to talk to us, or to tell us much if he did. His unofficial biographer, Paul Barry, was rebuffed by Packer even though Barry is a high profile political commentator in the Australian media. In fact, according to Barry, Packer's polo manager, Jim Gilmore, 'added several expletives, then told me how he'd spread my face. I wrote Packer two letters requesting interviews and received a response from his lawyers warning me off and threatening total legal action' (Hawley, 1993: 10). Barry's

publisher, Judith Curr, received warning letters, as well. In fact, Curr told a reporter from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'a lot of people said to me that it was either particularly brave or particularly foolish to publish such a book' (Barrowclough, 1994: 40).

Fortunately, our understanding has been deepened by three sociologically aware 'class traitors'. Robert Morrell's (1996) work on white settler masculinity in Natal, particularly as it relates to private schooling, is outstanding. Adam Hochschild (1987), apart from being a journalist and author, is also the son of the chairperson of the board of a vast mining multinational centred in South Africa. As an adult, his abhorrence of apartheid led him eventually to question the construction of his own masculinity. The ensuing account in *Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son* tells a story of his relationship with his father which is extraordinary in its intensity and perspicacity. And Ronald Fraser (1984: 91, 118), who has said that while he was 'objectively a member of a privileged class' he was 'unable subjectively to fill the role into which I was born', has also written about his ruling-class upbringing in his book *In Search of a Past: The Manor House, Amnersfield 1933–1945*. This is particularly interesting as it combines two different modes of enquiry: an oral history containing interviews with the servants who reared him and his own psychoanalysis, uniting a 'voyage of inner discovery' with an account of 'the social past'.

Life Histories

Fortunately, although ethnography and interviews are not possible for us, there seems yet to be a method suitable to the task we have set ourselves. Thomas and Znaniecki (1958), generally credited as the originators of what has come to be called the life-history method, developed this in an attempt to demonstrate that all social becoming can fruitfully be viewed as the product of a continual interaction between individual

consciousness and social reality. In this way, humans are both actively producing and continually produced. Thomas and Znaniecki thought that because this double relation expressed itself just about everywhere and most of the time, one was able, with this method, to obtain access to the reality of life which produced social categories such as classes (Kohli, 1981: 63). Life histories could show how social forces interact at an individual level to form those myriad decisions that cumulatively not only shape each life history itself, but also constitute the direction and scale of major social agencies and their activity (Thompson, 1981: 299). Connell *et al.* (1981: 105) found that the life-history approach enabled them 'to key into class processes, not just class positions' and gave them 'an opportunity to investigate the connections between class relations and gender relations – an interaction whose importance and complexity has become increasingly obvious'.

Life histories, too, have advantages over other forms of social inquiry. For instance, this method sometimes involves very few people. R.W. Connell's intriguing study of working-class men (Connell, 1991) is based on five life histories; and that of men in the environmental movement on six (Connell, 1990). This is trading off scope for depth, of course (Connell, 1995: 89–90). What is important in choosing the people to listen to is that they be aware of, informed about and involved in their cultural world and that they be able to articulate their points of view.

Life histories, at least as conceived by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958), may include not only interviews but also autobiographies, diaries and political memoirs. While each of these is constrained by the purpose for which it was composed and allows only a particular and partial view, they all contain the essential quality of life histories – they span a period of time. 'Life history method always concerns the making of social life through time. It is literally history' (Connell, 1995: 89).

Morgan (1992: 25) has claimed that men have the power, the leisure, and the resources to write, asking, 'Surely there must be something about what "it feels like to be a man" in all those volumes of fiction, of autobiography, confessions, diaries, histories and letters?' Clearly it is possible, then, to regard autobiographies and biographies as 'found

life histories'. Indeed, Sartre had developed this method for a social science of biography – an horizontal and vertical reading of the biography and of the social system, a movement back and forth from one to the other. This is precisely what Thomas and Znaniecki had thought they were doing as well. The effort they made to understand a biography in all its uniqueness became the endeavour to interpret a social system, as the phases and processes which mediate each are revealed in their relation to the other (Ferrarotti, 1981: 21–22).

In theory at least, life histories differ from autobiographies in that the latter are the product of one person, while the former are the product of at least two. Life histories are the product of an interaction, while an autobiography is not (Bertaux, 1981a: 8). In life histories, apparently, the narrator resembles an autobiographer, and the researcher a biographer (Catani, 1981: 212). According to Marcia Wright (1989, 155), while life histories are mediated by another (while retaining the subject's perspective), autobiographies imply the 'greatest degree of self-control' and biography is the study of one person informed by many sources of various significance.

Yet the very difference of the rich collapses these convenient categories. In his autobiography, *My Regards to Broadway*, James Fairfax (1991: vii, viii) – born into a wealthy Australian newspaper dynasty – lists 66 people who 'kindly agreed to be interviewed or talk to me' or who 'gave […] their frank recollections'. In addition he employed five research assistants who 'provided essential and lucid reports on the areas they covered'. Prince Charles' biographer, Jonathan Dimbleby (1994: xii), was assisted by the Prince's personal archivist, the Royal Archivist, the Librarian and Assistant Keeper of the Royal Archives. Even failed businessman Bob Ansett's (1986) autobiography was written with, and its ownership shared by, Bob Pullan, journalist and biographer of the famous. Several hundred people imparted to biographer Paul Barry (1994: vii) their memories of working for Australia's super-wealthy Packer family and of meeting or doing business with them over the years, and the Belfield, Hird and Kelly (1991) book on media magnate Rupert Murdoch draws on a large number of other sources and four earlier biogra-

phies. In one of those ironies of capitalism, the richer the subject, the more social is the production of their story, it seems. The lonely vigil of the autobiographer, or the one-on-one interaction with the biographer or life-historian, is not for them.

Autobiography, Biography and Validity

'We are', remarks Doris Lessing (1995: 14), 'enjoying a golden age of biography. What is better than a really good biography? Not many novels'. She should know. Five biographies had already been written about her, and three more were on the way when her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, appeared in 1995. Indeed, there seemed in the mid 1990s to be a 'biography boom', according to Elizabeth Young (1995: 7) in the *Guardian*, in which the 'general attitude of the publishers' seems to be 'Dead at last? Let the revels begin', giving the 'unfortunate impression of the deceased […] as carrion beneath a squabbling cloud of vultures, clutching cheques in their scaly, scrabbling claws'. Those who are still alive, though, sometimes fight back. Leader of the Australian Democrats, Cheryl Kernot, describing Conrad Black as 'boorish and incredibly pretentious', said he 'exemplified all the things that are wrong with absentee landlords'. She was strongly opposed to Black increasing his control of the Fairfax newspapers at the time that the Fairfax family's newspaper empire was crumbling and 'did not like him personally – a view strongly reinforced when she read his autobiography' (Burge, Porter, Kitney and Davies, 1996: 17). Black (1996: 16) for his part, referred to her, whom he'd 'happily never actually met', as 'banal, bumptious, belligerent and cliched'.

But will any biography or autobiography, do? Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (1AD) was 'bawdy, gossipy and wholly unreliable' in Young's (1995: 7) view, and this form was soon replaced by the idealised *Lives of the Saints* which remained pre-eminent until Boswell's *Life of Johnson*

(1791), which subsequently set the pattern for biographies. However the problems of truthfulness remained.

Conrad Black's ex-wife, Joanna, says that she thought he is 'living in a book, the private Black transforming more and more into his public persona'. Joanna thought that her husband 'had mapped out the life story of a great man and was determined to live it'. Perhaps the character in 'the book' is the true Conrad Black? 'Absolutely not,' she said. 'Absolutely not' (Siklos, 1995: 275, 276). But Tim Heald (1991: 239–240), the Duke of Edinburgh's biographer, disagrees. 'On the whole […] most people in real life are more or less like their public image […].' The Duke of Edinburgh 'seems remarkably like the Duke of Edinburgh'.

To make matters even more complicated, as time passes, the divisions between the factual biography and autobiography, and the novel seem to become increasingly blurred. David Thomson's biography of Orson Welles 'smacks a little of fiction' and he even considered writing it as a novel, 'but instead he demonstrates how densely reality and fiction become intertwined' (Romney, 1996: 14). Donald Horne (1975; 1985), on the other hand, has written what he calls a 'sociography' rather than an autobiography, and in it he attempts to show 'what social history can look like when told through *people*', especially the extent to which his 'adolescent revolt' was 'shaped and coloured by social circumstance'.

Then again, Lord Jeffrey Archer has written what he calls a 'novelography' of the lives of media magnates Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch ('80% fact, 20% fiction'), based on: 'copious research […] I knew Maxwell very well. We were in the House of Commons together […] Murdoch I have known for years too […] I like Rupert. He's a brilliant man. I enjoy his company' (Alderson, 1996: 7). Anyway, he owned the publishing house that produced the book. Fay Weldon (1996) was impressed: 'You gasp at the nerve of it. Archer, has simply plagiarised their unlikely lives […]. [He] presumably knows well – if he says that's how it's done, I'm prepared to believe him. His world, not mine'. But Bernard Crick in *Stranger Than Fiction*, his biography about Archer himself, suggests that Archer has lived a life 'based on half-truths and self-delusion' (Alderson, 1996: 7).