Working Class(ics): an immodest proposal

by Jerome Moran

(The reader must decide whether to take the proposal seriously. It is no more of a maggot than Swift's modest proposal.)

'Those buildings and their associations and privileges were not for him … He saw that his destiny lay not with these, but among the manual toilers in the shabby purlieu which he himself occupied, unrecognised as part of the city at all by its visitors and panegyrists, yet without whose denizens the hard readers could not read nor the high thinkers live.' (Thomas Hardy, *Jude The Obscure*)

'Why should you care so much for Christminster? Christminster cares nothing for you, poor dear!' (*Jude The Obscure*)

'You are one of the very men that Christminster was intended for when the colleges were founded; a man with a passion for learning, but no money, or opportunities … But you were elbowed off the pavement by the millionaires' sons.' (*Jude The Obscure*)

Preamble to a Proposal

In the Early Medieval cultural *iustitium* that was the 'Dark Ages' in western Europe, not many people, in spite of any superior social standing they might have had, were able to learn (formal) Latin. (Classical) Greek of course was even more unavailable outside the Greek-speaking areas. There was a dearth of people and institutions capable of teaching them.

In the 21st century not many people, because of their inferior social standing, are able to learn Latin or Greek, even though there are people and institutions capable of teaching them. But not everywhere. I live in a city with a very large working-class population. I am one of a handful of people able to teach Latin to A-level and beyond, most probably the only one able to teach Greek to an advanced level, possibly to any level. I am too old to teach either, and there are only two institutions, as far as I am aware, in which Latin is taught (no Greek, of course, certainly not to A-level) — a state selective grammar school with very few working-class pupils, one supposes, and an independent school with none, one supposes I do not think that there are any primary schools either that have taken advantage of the opportunity to teach Latin and/or Greek at KS2. Not everyone lives in London. Classics for All, the Iris Project, the Primary Latin Project, all have still to make their presence felt where I live.

The utilitarian argument that present society is so classless that working-class children who have the ability to learn the classical languages will not be greatly disadvantaged if they do not learn them, is as base as it is false. I have only to think of my own experience in order to refute it. So I, and all the people like me, would have been just as well off if we had not had the opportunity to learn Greek and Latin? Does that apply to the middle and upper classes too? Or are they uniquely entitled to cultural as well as economic, political and social capital?

Call me old-fashioned, but I still call them the 'working class'. They know who they are. (The 'underclass' is made up of that part of the working class who don't have work — and very little else.) And no, I don't care to define my terms, in this case 'working class' and 'underclass'. You don't need to be able to define a term in order to use it correctly. Most people are unable to define most terms (they can't define a definition for one thing, nor say whether it is of a term or a thing), but they are able to use them correctly even so. It is not true, *pace* Plato, that you don't know what a word means unless you can define it, nor what a thing is unless you can define it by identifying its nexus of supposedly necessary properties that constitute its alleged 'essence'.

The son of Irish working-class parents from Oldham, I started my grammar school education in Manchester in 1955. True to its designation, it taught grammar, the grammar of Greek and Latin (in that order). A year later, without so much as a by your leave (choice was something that came in a decade later, with doubtfully beneficial consequences), I was put in the school's 'Classics Stream', and there I stayed for the remainder of my school career, never once entering a science laboratory. I don't think the school had one; if it did it kept it well hidden. Vulgar science, a form of manual work that caused you to get your hands dirty, was not allowed to sully the purity

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of a Classics education. A suitable education then for a working-class boy. I was not aware of the anomaly at the time, nor that it was all part of an attempt to educate me out of my class — which it did of course, one of the inevitable, possibly regrettable, consequences of a grammar school education.

Such a thing could not happen nowadays; what is missing is the opportunity. It was decided, in the interests of equal opportunity, that no working-class child should be able to do Classics if not all of them could. The equality of the absence of opportunity was reinstated. You couldn't deprive the privileged classes of Classics though; after all, it was their birthright. I was born at just the right time: a few years either way and I would have missed out on the experience that has informed my life more than anything else that I can think of. I cannot imagine not being able to read Greek and Latin. I cannot imagine how other people can get by without them.

So now we have a classless society, the greater part of which is denied a knowledge of the classical languages. Is there a single working-class pupil who is studying A level Greek? (I was one of a class of over a dozen.) And pupils at private schools no longer have to compete with their working class intellectual superiors at grammar schools. 'Effortless ease' indeed.

Can anything be done about this? Can the working class have access to Classics again? I am talking principally about the languages, not about literature in translation, Classical Civilisation or Ancient History. And how many working-class state schools (there are such places) offer any of these subjects and at what level? We are living through another *saeculum obscurum* for Latin, even darker for Greek, and with no glimmer of a renaissance in sight despite what the credulous optimists like to think. I believe that it really is as bad as that.

The opportunity for working-class children to learn Greek and Latin was available for only about 25 years, and only for a small number of working-class children. Most middle-class children who attend a private school or a posh state school (most middle-class children) have always been able to do Latin at least. It is a badge of privilege and social exclusivity, as in fact as a learned second language it has always been.

Many children who would have gone to a grammar school and studied (the full range of) Classics have not been absorbed by independent and state-maintained selective schools with the same or similar provision. These are mainly working-class children from low-income families. Instead, they have gone to working-class comprehensive schools (there are such places) most of which have little or no provision for any form of Classics, certainly not for the classical languages. Sporadic attempts to introduce the kind of provision in comprehensive schools that was available in grammar schools tend to hit the headlines, of the educational press at least. That tells us everything about the present real state of things. A global and lasting solution is called for, not a partial, piecemeal and often short-lived palliative.

There are many working-class children out there who could benefit from Classics. There is no reason to suppose that a smaller percentage of working-class children than previously would nowadays have the ability to study Greek and Latin to the same level as before. The middle and upper classes do not have a monopoly of intelligence, or high intelligence. The causes of any appearances to the contrary are almost certainly culturally driven and due to socio-economic factors.

But, it will be said, it is not realistic to provide the opportunity where there is no demonstrable demand for it. Working-class children and their parents are not clamouring for Classics. But I say it is not reasonable to expect there to be a demand for something the existence of which most people are unaware. They weren't aware before, nor clamouring for it. But then they didn't need to: it was theirs of right.

And if people are really keen to learn Greek and Latin they can learn it at university, as they do Tibetan or Sanskrit. Really? What sort of people? What universities? How many working-class beginners are there at Oxford, Durham or St. Andrews? Or at any of the Russell Group universities?

And, it will be said, the 25 or so universities that still offer Classics are sufficient to meet the demand for Classics. How many applicants fail to get a place somewhere? But I am not talking about the demand for Classics at university. And there will be more demand for Classics at university when more people study it at school.

Success in the Greek and Latin language components of Classics degree courses is less predictable for students who are admitted without prior study of the languages. This is the case even when applicants, as part of the admissions procedure (as at Oxford), do well in language manipulation tests that involve artificial languages constructed on the model of the classical languages, There is no real substitute for the real thing. (Is the same true of other languages that have not previously been studied at school, e.g. Semitic languages?)

It may be said that many more working-class people go to university nowadays. I say that not many more of them go to the 25 or so universities that provide Classics courses. Already the same kind of distinction is being made between types of university that is made between types of school. Certain universities are termed 'prestigious' or 'more selective'. Nearly all of these have Classics courses. None of the others have Classics courses. But of course I am forgetting that the prestige universities can provide for all the demand there is for Classics courses. Demand by whom? How are such people in a position to demand Classics courses? Why is the demand so small that it can be serviced by so few universities?

You could almost say that a working-class state school (there are no working-class selective state schools) is one that does not offer any form of Classics. There may be other subjects or subject groups as well but I can't think of any. If I am right it is a pretty damning indictment of our education system and the society that it reflects. It shows how strong the association in the nation's psyche is between Classics and privilege, an intransigent obstacle between Classics and its take-up by the working class.

What follows are the OCR official statistics for the total number of candidates for Classics subjects at A and GCSE level in 2017. (The numbers of candidates for the subjects at Pre-U and IB do not significantly affect the overall numbers, and certainly not for the working-class representation.)

A-level

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Classical Civilisation 1538
Greek 249
Latin 1229

GCSE

Ancient History 919
Classical Civilisation 2827
Greek 1216
Latin 7800

The total number of candidates for all Classics subjects at A-level and GCSE combined was **16,525**. The total number for Greek and Latin was **10,494**.

(Would you have thought that Greek and Latin would have outnumbered non-language candidates by so many? And weren't the non-language courses supposed to bring in the many, while the language courses were thought suitable only for the few?)

There were also 2017 WJEC Levels 1 and 2 Certificates in Latin Language, Latin Literature, and Latin Language and Roman Civilisation that account for **4,713** candidates.

Of course, these figures are a snapshot only of the total number of people actually studying these subjects: they indicate the numbers of people (nearly all of them of secondary school age) studying them in the year of examination. A-level subjects are normally studied for two years, so (assuming a similar number in the first year of the course) we can double the figures for the A-level candidates. GCSE courses are usually two-year courses, so we can double the figures for the GCSE candidates too. Latin (and sometimes Greek) are often studied for at least one year before the actual GCSE course, so we must take account of these as well. Allowing for other groups of pupils too that I have no doubt overlooked, let us say that the total number of pupils studying Classics in secondary schools in England and Wales is between 40,000 and 50,000. I have no idea of the number of younger children who are now doing Latin and/or Greek at primary schools; nor of older people who are studying examinable Classics courses as home students who are not included in the OCR and WJEC figures; nor those taking Open University courses; nor those who are taking evening classes that do not necessarily involve examinations. If we want to get a true picture of all the people actively engaged in studying Classics we should add all the students on Classics courses at the 25 or so universities other than the OU. The list goes on, and the picture is perhaps getting a bit rosier now. But not for everyone. Most importantly for the purposes of this article, the figures do not show how many people there are in each of these categories of learners from a working-class background. There is good reason to believe that not many working-class people of any age have any meaningful involvement with Classics, and especially involvement that is recognised in some form of accreditation. The proposal that follows is about significantly increasing that number on an ongoing basis.

It is not generally known that only about one third of grammar school entrants actually took GCE O-level Latin. Viewed in this light, it would be an achievement if a similar percentage of learners in our comprehensive schools, previously denied access to Latin, could take GCSE Latin. The actual number of pupils would be fewer, to begin with, of course.

Perhaps one should not make such a fuss about the under-representation of the working class in Classics, since there are not that many of the middle class who do Classics, to examination level at any rate. Perhaps we should be more concerned about the future of the subject itself, given the falling numbers generally, or at least the insignificant increase in numbers.

A Proposal

Many/most children who go on to independent schools may start Latin at the age of 9 in a preparatory school. There is no reason why children in state primary schools should not do the same. In fact, as I explain later, ages 9-11, the final two years of primary school, are the optimum ages at which to start Latin and Greek for pupils who are going to progress to the secondary stage. Courses already exist (e.g. *Minimus* and *Gorilla Greek*), or will soon exist (*Mikromus* for Greek), and others will no doubt follow. There is no reason in principle why a more traditional course should not be used, as in preparatory schools. But, whatever the course, however disguised it may be, the principal goal must be the acquisition of language skills, not 'paralinguistic material'. It is not 'background knowledge' but language acquisition and the manipulation of language that confers 'transferable skills' and supervenient competences, whatever else one may get from learning Latin and Greek. The transferable skills benefits of learning the Classical languages should be made much of when promoting greater access, unless one can show that it is not Classics that confers such skills but rather some *tertium quid* that makes people good both at Classics and at the activities that exercise these skills. The circumstantial and anecdotal evidence that it is Classics is strong, I would say. Similarly, where short-term experiments have been done with children who would not ordinarily be exposed to the classical languages, the results have been encouraging for the all-round improvement of educational attainment. (But one should add that recent studies have tended to question whether this is so, except in the case of an improvement in the English of native speakers of English.)

I may be wrong, but I think that there are few young children who question the 'point' or 'relevance' of what they learn (their parents and society generally are another matter). They will enjoy learning anything, even what challenges them, provided it is presented to them in the right way — competently, inventively, imaginatively, and most of all enthusiastically.

If both Latin and Greek are to be taught in the primary school, it might be a good idea to teach them concurrently — alternating them on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis if it is not possible to have more than one class per week — rather than consecutively. That way both will still be fresh in the children's minds when they move on to the next stage at secondary school. There are other obvious benefits too, and the two languages are taught concurrently in secondary schools to those who study both.

By the time they leave primary school they will be hooked — and many of their parents too, perhaps, most of whom do not have a clue what Classics is and what it has to offer. Some may even want to learn themselves! If you start them on Latin and Greek in the secondary school, they will already be old enough to start asking 'What's the point?', their parents will do likewise (they may even get it from

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them in the first place), the grumbling will spread …

By the beginning of the secondary stage many/most pupils will have already done two years of Latin and/or Greek, at the end of the primary stage. Most importantly, they will want to carry on with Latin/Greek, and expect to be able to. Why shouldn't they, if they carry on with their other subjects? (This is one of the advantages of starting them off in the primary school, and in the last two years.) They will have some familiarity with how inflected languages work. They will have acquired some knowledge of basic grammar and vocabulary. They will also have some knowledge of the historical and cultural context in which the languages were used. All of this may serve to reduce the amount of weekly teaching time that is required for the GCSE course, especially if spread over four or even five years, as used to be the case in many grammar schools. This will reduce the pressure imposed on both teachers and pupils by current quite unreasonable and unrealistic time constraints. It will also make it possible to spend (more) time on ancillary activities that supplement the course. But throughout the secondary stage there should be at least as much opportunity to learn Latin and Greek as there is for modern foreign languages, with the same amount of teaching time, if required. The latter should not be compulsory at the expense of the former. Where groups are small it should be possible for them to be combined in a 'hub' school. Non-linguistic Classics courses should be available as humanities options for GCSE. After 16 there should be schools or colleges designated as specialised institutions with the full range of Classics subjects, as schools are designated for other subjects. These should be distributed across local authorities in such a way that there is access to them for anyone who wishes to make use of them. They might operate as hub colleges in the same way as hub schools. There is no reason why the hub, at both levels, should not be a selective state or even non-state institution with an established record of Classics provision. (Increasingly, health resources (and patients) are being shared between private and NHS hospitals, with the latter picking up the tab, presumably. There is no reason in principle why the same thing should not happen with educational resources.) Such an arrangement would make the teaching of Greek more viable. At this level there should be more interaction of various kinds, where possible, between colleges and local universities. This would be a particularly valuable experience for working-class students and might encourage more to apply to read Classics at university.

The collaboration of state schools and selective state schools and private schools may serve to improve the popular image of Classics as hopelessly elitist, and it may lead to more state schools offering Classics. The regular interaction of young people from different social classes with a common goal may further, in its own small way, a mutual regard that can create a dent at least in the barrier of social divisiveness, even though it does nothing to alter the material situation. Young people generally since the 1960s have demonstrated that they can be potent instruments of social change. On the other hand, supping with the devil, as some might see it, may not be to everyone's taste. But at least an unequal system would on the face of it be working for, not against, the interest of the underprivileged. And more people would get to learn Greek and Latin (in that order).

This new dispensation for Classics in state schools to facilitate wider access for children from working-class backgrounds should be introduced gradually, stage by stage, learning from each previous stage how best to make the necessary arrangements for the next stage, and allowing time in which to do it. It should be introduced in the penultimate year of the primary school. Before it begins there should be a period of one or two years to make all the necessary preparations for its introduction. By the time it is introduced in to secondary schools for the next stage (11-16) there should have been ample time in which to prepare for this stage, and to ensure a smooth and seamless transition from the primary school. The final stage will be the two year A-level courses.

I am aware that parts of my proposal are being or have been implemented on a small scale, e.g. Latin in primary schools, secondary school collaboration. But how many of the pupils involved are/have been from the working class? I am less interested in extending provision to the small number of the middle class who are not already provided for. Again, various kinds of no doubt well-meaning short-term outreach projects have been launched. How many of them have been more than 'samplers' and have borne fruit in the form of established further learning opportunities leading to examination qualifications? What is needed is the kind of provision that was available in grammar schools. There was no serious will to maintain this provision in the pioneering comprehensive schools, so concerned were educationists and politicians to create institutions that were, or could be perceived as, very different from grammar schools and independent schools. Classics stood out like a sore thumb: it had to be cut off. Ironically, a few aspiring comprehensives in mainly middle-class areas, as well as some jumped-up ones in more working-class areas, tried to keep Classics going for a while in order to enhance their academic image by contrast with most other comprehensives. But everyone could see that the writing on the wall was not in Greek or Latin.

What is needed now is the will, on the part of present-day comprehensives and their political masters, to do what most of those early comprehensives shied away from. Primary schools too would have to come on board in greater numbers. I am not advocating a return to grammar schools. I want comprehensive schools to have the best that grammar schools had, and for it to be available to all, even though not all would be able to benefit equally from it. But that is true of many other areas of the curriculum, academic and non-academic, from further mathematics to gymnastics. We don't proscribe these because only a few people can excel in them. And I would argue that the benefits and rewards of Classics are greater. I was a more than passable footballer; I would have swapped football for Greek any day.

So, there you have it, that is my immodest proposal. Swift's modest proposal was of course a grotesque satire. I can only hope that my own proposal may be received more seriously. Objections on the grounds of impracticability I regard as qualified support, and I would rather people question the means than reject the end.

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