

On Losing the Royal Touch

Phil Cohen

How do you map a monarchy? Depict the location of its palaces and other places of residence? Display the extent of its material wealth or its kinship connections? Create a psycho-geography of members of the royal household, or devise a cartogram showing their personal popularity or lack of it with different groups of 'subjects'?

A wealth map would be an obvious starting point, but understandably members of the Royal Family are a bit touchy about the extent of their personal and collective wealth. Some of this information is publicly available. For example, the Crown Estate's annual report for 2019/20 put the value of the British royal family's land portfolio at £13.4 billion. The exact personal wealth of the Queen is unknown, although guesstimates put it somewhere between £300 and £400 million and she receives an additional £30 million a year from the Civil list to help with her running costs. The royal art collection of old Masters has been valued at more than the whole of its other assets put together.

So far so predictable. But so what? Hands up who thinks the future of the British monarchy depends on its manifest wealth? It would perhaps be more interesting to do a network map showing the social connections of the Windsors with other royal families and members of the hereditary aristocracy, as well as with what used to be called High Society. This latter has now expanded to include a global celebrity culture made up of the super-rich and the super stars of sport, entertainment, fashion and the creative industries. Debutantes may no longer be presented to the Queen, and nowadays it is the glitterati who give audiences and hold court, but the Season still continues, with Royal Ascot, Wimbledon, Henley Regatta, Oxbridge May Balls, and the Queen's Summer Garden parties its hotspots. A social network map would thus show just how closely integrated the new and old aristocracies are, not only in terms of inter-marriage, but through shared interests and lifestyles.

At the same time the British Royal Family, or what is sometimes called 'the firm' is a very peculiar kind of business, exerting behind-the-scenes influence on the political culture while maintaining scrupulous formal distance from the operations of government. The fact that Britain is a constitutional monarchy but has no written constitution has allowed a grey area to emerge in which an informal and largely invisible network of patronage and preferment meshes in seamlessly with other hierarchies of public prestige, most evidently in the honours system.

If you are reading this, the chances are that, like me, you are not that interested in following the detailed doings of this elite and indeed you may feel indifferent or even hostile towards their existence. This antipathy is quite widely shared but is still a minority view. The gossip columns are as alive as ever with the news of the Great and Not so Good, their comings and goings on, with social media making it possible for everyone nowadays to be their own gossip columnist. Royal watching is now part of a more general fascination with the spectacle of wealth and power; it may be driven by voyeuristic identification or envy, a desire to emulate or to see the high and mighty taking a fall; whatever the motivation, this form of star gazing shows no signs of decreasing in popularity and seems quite compatible with holding political views which are diametrically opposed to the existence of self-perpetuating elites.

Scandal and rumour are grist to this particular mill. It could be argued that celebs are only getting what they ask for, if not what they always deserve. After all these are people who live in and for the public gaze and who often operate a carefully crafted public persona designed to excite this attention. Although they may, at the same time, go to great lengths to ensure that their private lives are safe from media scrutiny, they inevitably become the focus of intense curiosity. This tension between public face and private life is the fulcrum around which the culture of celebrity revolves; the secret of its attraction lies in the secrets which the apparatus of fame both conceals and potentially reveals. Enchantment and disenchantment are two complimentary sides to the frenzy of renown.

The British Royal Family are at once highly dependant on the media which sustains celebrity culture *and* continue to attempt to occupy a special position of inaccessibility in relation to it. The Royal Nemo project. It is that contradiction which is tearing this monarchy apart, even and especially when it is denied or displaced; when it is dramatically acted out, as it was in the case of Lady Di and now with Harry and Meghan, the arranged marriage between monarchical and celeb culture falls apart.

So, to *that* interview. After the long campaign of vilification in the Tory Gutter Press, Meghan and Harry get their chance to dish the dirt on 'the firm' *and* the TGP media. Washing dirty linen in public evokes a homely image of ordinary folk living cheek by gowl in fear of the prying eyes of nosey neighbours. But applied to a family sequestered in castles and stately homes, guarded from the madding crowd of paparazzi by an army of security guards, it takes on a hallucinatory quality: all those skeletons in the Royal family closet suddenly emerging blinking into the glare of the TV cameras.

I did a straw poll of close friends and colleagues, most of whom are very much on the Left politically with quite a few admitting to being republicans. They almost all watched the Oprah Winfrey interview, as did your correspondent. Some claimed it was in the line of professional duty, other admitted to 'curiosity'. I asked them if their attitudes to the Monarchy had been changed as a result of watching the interview. A few said they now felt more sympathetic to Harry and especially Meghan, for having to put up with such an uptight and racist

establishment. The majority said it confirmed their view that the Queen and other members of the Royal Family were simply out of touch with the modern world and ordinary people, and that the institution itself was well past its sell by date. Some thought it could be modernised, although unclear how this might be done. Interestingly those who were most sceptical about the possibilities of reform, were also reluctant to propose abolition. The historical association of republicanism with regicide still leaves a bad taste in many British mouths. Protector Cromwell's democratic reputation has not exactly improved over the past three hundred and fifty years.

The Royal Touch

What struck me in these responses was the constant refrain that the 'establishment' of which the Royal Family are still a conspicuous part, were seen to be 'out of touch', not just with the people, but with their own feelings. The stiff upper lip sense of public duty which the Queen is still seen to embody has come to represent not an ideal, but a socially distanced and emotionally remote stance on the part of a privileged elite. In contrast Lady Di, the 'People's Princess', was seen as someone who wore her heart on her sleeve, in a series of interviews she made no secret of her emotional turmoil. She also went in for a lot of hugging, including patients with AIDS. As a result, she was widely seen as having 'the common touch' even if she was a Sloane Ranger.

Of course, we are living in a period of touchy-feely identity politics. Remember David Cameron urging his fellow Tories to 'hug a hoody'? No doubt to console these young people for the fact that his government's policies had ensured that they had no jobs and no youth centres to hang around in while waiting for one. In fact, touching is not a new instrument of the body politic. The royal touch and its supposed healing powers was an intrinsic part of the monarchy's equipment from the middle ages onwards. In the age of Feudal absolutism, the laying on of royal hands was a sign of possessing God's gift to cure all classes of people of particular diseases. The practice was thus a means of claiming and legitimating - we might even say performing - a divine right to rule. English monarchs made use of this device right up until the end of the 17th century.

Although the application of the royal touch fell into abeyance, the notion that the monarch's body possessed special powers continued. This derived from the idea that the monarch had two bodies, a physical body that ages, gets ill and dies like any other human's, and a spiritual body that was immortal and transmitted its hereditary powers from generation to generation. This distinction became the cornerstone of a political theology of king and queenship whose traces can be found in the more modern distinction between the sacred and profane aspects of the monarchy as an institution. The two are brought together in the bio-political concept of *breeding* that is central to the aristocratic model of society. Within this frame, as Hilary Mantel has reminded us, the Royals are essentially carriers of a bloodline and as such a collection of organs.

In the cult of Gloriana, for example, the virgin queen's body, and especially her vagina, this 'precious jewel' as Shakespeare called it, had to be protected from the laying on of foreign hands,

so that the physical integrity of this 'earth of majesty' would remain intact along with the Queen's own thaumaturgical power. This fascination with royal genitalia and their procreative capacities has remained, albeit more out of prurient curiosity than as an agency of statecraft. In a documentary made about Prince Harry's tour of duty with the British army in Afghanistan, he was asked by a group of young fellow officers what colour his pubic hair was. Fast forward a decade and he finds himself interrogated by a member of his own family as to the likely skin colour of his new baby.

Nowadays the therapeutic laying on of hands is left to the Clergy, masseurs and Reichian psychoanalysts, but the *aura of the royal presence* continues to exercise a metaphysical power. The continued legitimacy of 'regality' has increasingly come to depend on maintaining this aura in the secular form of 'pomp and circumstance' via elaborate public ceremonials - for example the trooping of the Colour on the Queen's birthday. The royal handshake no longer claims any miraculous healing power, but it does affirm a certain ritual contact between a 'majestic presence' and its subjects which conjures up a harmonious social order in which each has their appointed place.

Indeed, one possible reason for the continued public support for monarchy is a pervasive desire for some version of social harmony that transcends or at least magically suspends bitter divisions based on structural inequalities. Even though the institutional existence of the Royal Family embodies these very inequalities, its members, and especially the Queen, are still often regarded as somehow being 'above them'. However, given the increasingly disunited state of the 'United Kingdom', with the rise of determined regional nationalisms in Scotland and Wales, and the imminent advent of a demographic majority in Northern Ireland in favour of unification with the republic in the South, it is likely that in the foreseeable future the Monarchy's writ will be confined to what has always been its bastion, namely England.

Invented Traditions

There is clearly a danger that a monarchy still wrapping itself in the Union Jack will be adopted as a symbol of a last ditch unionism or even of a resurgent little Englander nationalism promoted by the populist and xenophobic Right with its dog whistle messages about white supremacy. In principle the Monarch as the titular head of the Commonwealth is officially committed to multiculturalism but given the current move by many of these ex-colonies to secede and embrace republicanism as the final stage of the decolonisation process, it is looking more and more unlikely that King Charles III will be able to play this particular card.

This issue was dramatised for me by a 12 year old boy from an ex-dockers family and an Irish background with whom I worked as part of an anti-racist project in East London schools. He was vociferous in his fear that the growing presence of BAME communities in this part of London would complete the destruction of its traditional working class culture which started with the closure of the docks. At one point in the discussion he turned to me and said 'Come off it sir,

you can't imagine Britain with a black queen, can you?' I replied, 'Well maybe not, but you clearly can!' We have just witnessed a situation in which the arrival of a Black baby in the royal family was too much for the TGP and called forth a wide range of negative reactions directed at its parents, and especially its mother.

History, and the tainted legacy of Empire, is at the epicentre of the culture war just now. Certainly we have moved on from the kind of history I was taught at school, whose principles of periodisation were nothing if not regal; we did the Plantagenets, then the Tudors and Stuarts, and European history ended abruptly in 1789 with Louis XVI's head in the guillotine. Yet we have not entirely abandoned the monarchy as an epochal structure: we still talk of Regency furniture, Georgian architecture and poetry, Victorian values, and the Teddy Boys who were working class kids dressed after the fashion of the Edwardian gentleman.

In this context it is perhaps worth remembering that the 'Windsors' are flying a flag of convenience. In 1917 during the First World War, at the height of anti-German feeling they anglicised the family name from Battenberg to Mountbatten, and adopted their favourite castle as their patronym in order to lay claim to home-grown patriotic roots, and to dissociate themselves from their German ancestry. Perhaps what keeps the British monarchy alive, if not well, is that it is so conspicuously an invented tradition, a historical anachronism which is a reminder of a once-upon-a-time when Britain felt itself Great. Nevertheless, exchanging a rather delicious marzipan cake (a Battenberg) for a greasy brown Windsor soup seems in retrospect like the wrong choice of culinary traditions...

The monarchy may well lose its institutional *raison d'être* in a de-colonial Britain, especially if a devolved country has a new written constitution even further marginalising its already limited power of social harmonics. But this does not necessarily mean that its function as a natural symbol of traditional authority will vanish. To understand why we have to grasp what Majesty unconsciously represents and the terms and conditions of the Royal Family's anchorage in popular culture.

A Right Royal Family Romance

At this point I make no apology for the argument turning auto-biographical. As a child I was told by my mother, an enthusiastic monarchist, that I was named after the Queen's husband, Prince Philip. In response my father who was a staunch republican, informed me that in fact I was named after his father who was a Russian Jewish immigrant and a follower of the Russian anarchist, Prince Kropotkin. Family arguments, which mostly took place around the dinner table, thus frequently took the form of a replay of Royalists versus Roundheads. I generally took the side of the Roundheads, ganging up with my dad. But in my secret fantasy life it was a very different story.

For my Freudian family romance I thus had a choice between two Princes as my make believe 'onlie begetter': the romantic Russian revolutionary or the dashing young Greek naval officer who was the consort of the Queen. Inevitably my choice was dictated by early images of the ideal child. Having transitioned from the frilly frocks of early babyhood to the sailor suits of boyhood, I was given a model sailing boat as a seventh birthday present. In the early 1950's the regalia of maritime empire were still furnishing the identity props of middle-class childhood. So the choice between Princes was a no brainer. Clearly my real dad was the Duke of Edinburgh; as his illegitimate son I had been sent to this weird half-Jewish family to be brought up in order to avoid public embarrassment. As Prince Charles' unofficial half-brother I awaited the call from the Palace to tell me that I had at last been recognised as having royal blood.

Sadly the call never came, although as a precautionary measure my mother followed in the Queen's footsteps and invested in a corgi, thus at a stroke affirming her Welshness and her royalism. Alas for her ambitions and mine, the dog in question routinely pissed on the carpet, mistaking it for grass, and took against humans, especially visitors. Our brief flirtation with canine royalty ended when 'Binky' sank his teeth into the calf of a prominent Tory MP who came to tea, much to my father's delight. My mother subsequently attributed the foreclosure of her career as a Tory councillor to the late Binky's actions, as well as to her son's in occupying the Queen Mother's old house at 144 Piccadilly in what became known as the HippyDilly Squat.

Despite the fact that my best friend at school had a father who was Lord Lieutenant of Sussex and as the Queen's representative in the county lived in an appropriately stately home where I sometimes stayed on holiday, I eventually grew out of my royal family romance. Nevertheless, through my teenage years I still had the occasional dream of visiting Buckingham Palace and getting lost in its corridors in search of some secret treasure, or, on hot Summer nights, Brigitte Bardot. Then in my early twenties I had the opportunity to turn dream into reality.

I attended a disco organised by the Gay Liberation Front and got chatted up by a burly guy in his fifties who had short hair, wore a blue blazer with knife edge creases in his trousers. I felt sorry for him as he looked so out of place amongst all the long haired willowy hippies cavorting to the Grateful Dead. It turned out he was a butler at the Palace. He told me that there were a lot of gay people employed as servants in the Royal household; they were preferred to heterosexuals on the grounds that they were unlikely to get pregnant and have to take time off work. No ideological commitment to gay liberation then, just good old fashioned heterosexist pragmatics!

'My' butler let me know in quite explicit terms that he had a few other servants under him and that the position was always open to new recruits. All too predictably he had interpreted my friendly curiosity as a sexual advance but as he did not quite live up to my image of Prince Charming, I politely turned his invitation down, attractive though the prospect of getting laid in Buck House was to a budding anarchist.

This experience did however alert me to the fact that there is more than one way of being a Queen. Contemporary gay culture has entirely democratised the practice of queening around.

Anyone who dresses the part can do it. Coming out no longer means upper class girls learning how to curtsy. In fact, the queering of monarchy, its promotion as a spectacle of High Camp, might just possibly be its only saving grace. All that dressing up in gorgeous Ruritanian uniforms and parading about in leather boots with swords flashing, spurs jingling and horse whip in hand, how very BDSM!

There are in fact quite a few opportunities for dressing up fancy currently on offer. Themed parties for both children and adults regularly feature a cast of Princes and Princesses, as well as popular characters from films, TV and sport. You can go as Lady Di or Darth Vader, play at Superman or Godzilla for a night. Prince Harry once notably attended a celeb party dressed as a Nazi – perhaps an oblique tribute to the fact that one of his forebears, Edwards VII, like many members of the British Establishment in the 1930's, waved the Union Jack for Hitler.

Between Mimesis and Masquerade

The purpose of this cautionary tale is to suggest that if royalty did not exist we would probably have to invent some version of it. The aura of majestic presence is a quasi permanent feature of the contemporary media spectacle, a chronic counterpoint to that disenchantment of the world which capitalism and its instrumental rationalities has achieved. This enables 'commoners' to practice a form of royal baptismal naming in claiming entitlement to public recognition for their star quality. Cue Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, those Queens of Swing and the Blues, not to mention the singer formerly known as Prince (aka Rogers Nelson). Here at least the social imaginaries of celeb and monarchical culture go hand in glove.

More significantly, the association of regality with the capacity to regale others with richly entertaining stories about one's accomplishments speaks to a pervasive desire to give a local habitation and a name to yearnings for some other possible world than the mundane one we actually inhabit. This imaginative world is already heavily populated with characters from the fairy stories we grow up with, it is full of frogs turning into Princes at the first kiss, Princesses meeting Paupers in rags to riches romances, so many occasions in which a fixed social order is magically turned upside down and people temporarily trade places.

These make-believe stories address an existential predicament intrinsic to our contemporary culture of competitive individualism; we are told we are the authors - and heroes - of our own life stories, and encouraged to become whatever we want to be, while at the same time our actual lives grow ever more uncertain and circumscribed. The result is to institutionalise what Freud called the 'narcissism of minor difference.' From an early age we learn to big ourselves up by belittling the peers of whatever realm we happen to inhabit. We first learn the tricks of this trade in the playground: 'I am the King (or Queen) of the Castle, You're a dirty wee rascal.' The same script is enacted in the factional struggles for power within our political class.

Under these conditions, the quest for some or any-form of transcendental identity can become overwhelming. There is no shortage of fame academies, both official and unofficial, to fan the flames of personal ambition. Do-it-yourself Royalty simply provides the vocabulary and syntax for these aspirations to become articulate. These narratives are structured like daydreams, but they are perhaps best cast in the form of an ongoing soap opera. One reason we have become so immersed in the Harry and Meghan story is that each episode ends with the promise 'to be continued.' Whatever our views on the monarchy we want to remain in touch with the story line to find out what happens next...

The modern monarchy - that still fashionable oxymoron - exists in a strange limbo between mimesis and masquerade. It projects itself as a model of democratic values whilst its very conditions of existence are their living negation. Its dynastic placeholders are supposed to embody an ideal version of modern family values, but their actual family relations are as dysfunctional as they are patriarchal. So they are forced to pretend to be something they are not while their 'subjects' are supposed to pretend that they are taken in by the performance of regality and in turn perform rituals of deference in which they no longer believe. This unwritten contract is thus a kind of *folie a deux* that we re-enact every time we sing the national anthem imploring a God we do not believe in to save a Queen we no longer wish to rule over us in any substantive sense. If we were not so busy dressing up in the cast and trappings of majesty, to conceal what we have been told are our mundane (and hence despised) realities, we would indeed be able to see and to say that the King or Queen has no clothes other than those with which we invest them. But the magic of mimesis is that it so easily slides into masquerade, simulation into dissimulation.

This was brought home to me while I was watching Harry and Meghan in conversation with Oprah Winfrey, who it turned out is now a close neighbour in Santa Barbara. Ostensibly a conversation between billionaires about the personal impact of emotional poverty and family abuse, we were in fact witnessing a carefully orchestrated transition from majesty into commoner. For a start Harry no longer spoke the Queen's English. Gone was the strangled vowels and clipped consonants, that peculiar mixture of languid drawl and baying which we associate with the entitled voice of the English upper class. In its place there was a transatlantic version of Estuary, no doubt heavily influenced by Meghan. We were being treated to the spectacle of a nice young suburban couple talking openly about a nightmare they had lived through and just about survived. Mr and Mrs Everyone, except, of course, for the apparatus of wealth and celebrity just out of shot that made the whole thing possible and to which the accolade of appearing on the Oprah show to hold court in front of millions only added further kudos.

A similar sense of unreality attended the media spectacle which was arranged around the death of the Duke of Edinburgh. Although his demise was widely anticipated, the ramping up of public attention was achieved by carefully orchestrated expressions of praise and condolence by public figures across the political spectrum, all of them carefully choosing their words to avoid giving a hostage to fortune. A spontaneous outpouring of public affection and grief it was not. So we got

a portrait of a faithful spouse and devoted family man, a swashbuckling sailor, a pioneer of environmentalism, and a champion of youth. His passion for polo, horse riding, grouse shooting, and well bred 'fillies', provided an exotic aura of aristocratic eccentricity as did his famous dislike of people with slitty eyes.

When a living anachronism dies, securing a posthumous reputation requires special measures, over and above the pomp and circumstance of the funeral, which in any case have had to be scaled back due to Covid. So, for the purposes of his legacy, Prince Philip has been re-invented as a man of our time, even a 'man for all seasons'. Perhaps, given that so much of his life was dedicated to the close observance of royal protocol, and to the externalities which govern the role of the monarch's consort, he is closer to the figure portrayed in Robert Musil's novel, 'The Man Without Qualities', whose hero appears at first to be engaged in an epic renunciation of personal ambitions, but only, we discover, as a strategy for pursuing them by other more indirect means.

So, yes, maybe someday my Prince - or Princess - will come if I stay tuned to the right wavelength on social media. In the meantime, for those like me, who are more sanguine about the prospects for living happily ever after with or without a national anthem, we always have the alternative of watching the Royle family saga unfold in endless TV repeats. Like Jim, Barb, Denise and Anthony we are immobilised in front of our screens, turning slowly into couch potatoes while the world seems to pass us by.

Yet hold on a moment, this is not quite the end of the story. Unlike the Royles, we can still dream of escape to a Point Nemo of our own choosing. Here at last, miraculously, we may find all our favourite people and activities assembled in one place, within touching distance, no need to Zoom. A starting point perhaps for building forward to a better, more majestically mundane post pandemic world. To Be Continued...

Further Reading

Ernst Kantorowicz *The King's Two Bodies* Princeton 1957

Hilary Mantel et al *Royal Bodies* London Review of Books 2018

Leo Braudy *The Frenzy of Renown :Fame and its history* Yale 1997

Marc Bloch *The Royal Touch* Routledge 1973

Phil Cohen 'The Perversions of Inheritance' in H Bains and P Cohen (eds) *Multi-racist Britain* Macmillan 2004

Tom Nairn *The Enchanted Glass :Britain and its monarchy* Verso 2011