

# What is a Spiv?

In these days, when everybody is becoming Spiv-conscious, to ask what is a Spiv might seem to border on the fatuous. The purpose of this article will merely be to attempt to show that as a comprehensive definition of idler, drone and parasite the word Spiv leaves much to be desired.

Undoubtedly high-powered publicity has focussed the Spiv in constant if dubious limelight. For some he may yet come to acquire something of the symbolical status his more sinister counterpart, the American gangster, possesses for a generation of film-goers.

Shortages, Rationing, The Black Market, as some of capitalism's present evils, have provided the conditions and opportunities for making England much more a land fit for Spivs to live in than it ever was: or likely to be it seems. For if the statements of certain Government spokesmen are to be taken at their face value, the Spiv is already on his way out. The Government in their efforts to ease the embarrassing, even if temporary, "labour shortage" for contemporary capitalism, have ear-marked the Spiv as a source of potential labour-power. For this Government of planners the unplanned existence of the Spiv (unplanned that is for the existing requirements of Capitalism) becomes at least a little irksome.

The Spiv thus finds himself the subject of Governmental interest and the object of weighty political pronouncements. The word is officially recognised now and is considered normal to the vocabulary of Cabinet Ministers.

Even in the rarefied atmosphere of The House of Lords the word has made its debut. Lord Pakenham replying to Lord Amwell (formerly Mr Fred Montague, MP) on the direction of idleness, said, "Lord Amwell no doubt referred to the gentlemen known as spivs and drones. He agreed that however wide his definition we had no use for slackers at this time". (*Daily Telegraph*, 7/8/47). No doubt an interpretation of slackers in the sense of "a wide definition" might have found room for a broader and perhaps more embarrassing inclusion than that permitted by the more restrictive nature of the word Spiv. Doubtless comprehensive definitions of terms, while admirable in theory, are not necessarily politic in practice.

Mr Attlee in the House of Commons the same day said, "We shall take all action open to us against the Spivs and other drones". Like Lord Pakenham Mr Attlee did not attempt a definition of terms. To have done so might have held awkward implications for the consideration of the members present. It might conceivably have led to the reading of "The Riot Act" in the "Mother of Parliaments". A political flash-back, nevertheless, recalls the coupling of drones with "idle rich", in the classic days of Labour Party propaganda.

Nevertheless, Mr Shinwell speaking on the question of appointments to the Electricity Board, did say "We have no regard for those persons who perform no useful service at all . . . They have been described as parasites, idlers, drones and rentiers". He added, "I don't intend to appoint them to any Board for which I am responsible." (*Daily Telegraph*, 24/6/47). Whether this constitutes one of Mr Shinwell's noted lapses into indiscretion or a momentary glimpse of a more fundamental aspect of drones and

parasites, we venture no opinion. No threat of work direction for these gentlemen, however, only non-appointment to various Boards.

Mr Isaacs, Minister of Labour, has said, that "Spivs are not so numerous as some people think". But at the trade union Conference he spoke of using full Governmental powers of direction in regard to them (*Daily Telegraph*, 3/9/47). He also told us that there are people who toil not and depend on the dividends earned by other workers. Had he said a wealthy section live on dividends and profits produced solely by the workers, he would have obtained full marks. Mr Isaacs is, however, not a person inclined to indiscretions.

Mr Tom Williams, MP, also spoke on direction of labour. He suggested if there are Spivs and drones or *any one else* (italics ours) who refused to accept occupations, Unemployment Benefit should be stopped, adding that starving men and women into work is the highest penalty which ought to be tried in the first six or twelve months. (*Evening News*, 2/9/47). Coupon clippers, rentiers and other profit-participants are, however, debarred from drawing Unemployment Benefit. Moreover, as their level of incomes have no more relevance to "The Poverty Line" than it has to "The Plimsoll Line", Mr Williams' dire threats to people refusing direction of work will doubtless be met by them with calm and studied contempt.

The Spiv assumes then the role of the Labour Government's whipping boy. In the past the hard-faced business man and the treble-chinned plutocrat could be pilloried in the political stocks for Capitalism's shortcomings. Called upon to administer capitalism the Labour Party must perforce—vide Morrison—ask for their co-operation and even enthusiasm for "Labour's" New Social Order. The Spiv will be pleased or perturbed to discover that it is he and not the private ownership of the means of wealth production which now constitutes the basic contradiction of capitalism.

The Spiv, however, is not merely a post-war product or the illegitimate child of a Labour Government. His prototype has for many decades alternatively flourished and decayed in capitalist society. He is generally a big city product. Born mostly in city slums or near slums he early experiences the drab life and sordid surroundings of those who, like himself, dwell there and toil for others. When the opportunity occurs for doing a bit on the side or fiddling, he seizes it as a more lucrative and more colourful occupation than the monotony of the daily grind. He is often, however, compelled to devote more time and energy to his peculiar calling than is customary for him to admit. Neither can the Spiv for the most part wholly emancipate himself from his working class status. "In bad times" he is often reluctantly forced back into workshop or factory. For the Spiv, however, the age-long habit of work engrained in his fellow-toilers has been seriously undermined.

It has been said that the Spiv is at least a rebel. Some people have even sentimentalised him as a kind of revolt against the conditions imposed by the nature of capitalist exploitation. The Spiv's own anti-Government and anti-authoritarian outlook might seem to lend colour to this view. The Spiv, however, generally lacks the class loyalty and class sentiment that goes to the making of the class-conscious social revolutionary. The zeal and selfless devotion of the socialist, with his illimitable vista of a world based on production for use and the Brotherhood of Man, lights no fires in the mind and imagination of the Spiv. A good time and plenty of fun at the expense of others gravely limits his social horizon. Pleasure and "the easy way" becomes basic to his

existence. His mode of life constitutes a form of social parasitism which conflicts with the healthy social instincts of the vast majority of workers.

Also the Spiv evolves a standard of values that make for unconscious subservience to wealth and luxury. He is consequently, however insignificant, a factor making for its perpetuation. At his best he is a politically unreliable element. At his worst he can become the strike-breaking instrument of the employing class or a tool for political reaction. In a socialist society where all able-bodied people will engage in productive activity and where the principle prevails—From each according to his ability, to each according to his need—the Spiv, as such, can have no place.

The social solidarity of a system such as the present one is cleft by its basic class antagonism. With the decay of its own outworn economic functions goes the decay of its outworn ethical creeds. The ideological veneer of its so-called public opinion merely hides the subversion of its traditional moral tenets to private forms of hypocrisy and cynicism. The wealth and luxury of present society then breeds its own type of social parasitism with its individual greed and unscrupulousness and its inevitable anti-social consequences. It is this which sets the individual against society and, as in the case of the Spiv, who attempts to imitate and emulate the ruling section, society against the individual. It is hardly to be wondered that the putrefying effects of such a social cesspool as Capitalism, fail to secure for the population at large a 100 per cent immunity from contamination. Given capitalist society the Spiv must flourish like a green bay tree. Changing circumstances may decimate his ranks, but as an inevitable product of existing social conditions, he can hardly cease to exist.

True that the padded shoulders, the diagonally woven suit, the spear-pointed collar and dazzle tie have given the Spiv a sartorial significance and setting. If, however, for a double-breasted camel coat we substitute a faultlessly cut dress suit, the four bob jive for the dance floors of expensive clubs and exclusive hotels, the cheap billiard hall and garish saloon for Monte Carlo and other fashionable gambling resorts; the significance attached to the word Spiv becomes vague and even blurred.

It may be said that the Spiv, by devious methods of obtaining goods in short supply and selling at extortionate prices, is guilty of anti-social practices. Nevertheless he has the time-honoured methods of "Rings", "Market Corners" and their inevitable outcome, Trusts and Combines, to set him a precedent. Again, if he plies a doubtful trade, the long existence of nefarious company-promoters and Bucket shop sponsors shows that in the matter of shady transactions the Spiv is no path-breaking pioneer. That the Spiv lives by the dubious exercise of his wits may also be true. Yet while a section of the community live on the unpaid labour of others well might the Spiv-kettle, in the matter of social parasitism, retort "Why call me black, brother pot?"

Nevertheless the word is accepted now. From a slang term of doubtful pedigree it is on its way to an assured place in the English dictionary. Henceforth it will be synonymous with idler, drone and parasite. As a definition it will obscure rather than enlighten. Its emphasis will be on those who live by their wits and doubtful practices and not on those whose social parasitism is the outcome of the exploitation of the vast majority through the medium of class-ownership of the means of wealth production. All of which might suggest that there is a form of intellectual Spivery in addition to a social one. Concluding, may we repeat—What is a Spiv?

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