

Peter Womack

# Entitled

'Entitled', in the sense currently on everyone's lips ('believing oneself to be inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment'<sup>1</sup>), is an adjective. A phrase such as 'a group of older, rather entitled, people', for example, makes this unmistakable both by placing it in front of the noun and by treating it as gradable (i.e. if you can be said to be 'rather' entitled, or 'very' entitled, or 'less' entitled than someone else, then 'entitled' is definitely an adjective).<sup>2</sup> So it is interesting to find that the *OED* mostly presents the word not as an adjective at all, but as a form of the verb 'to entitle'. For example, I may be 'entitled to compensation', or I may read a periodical 'entitled *Critical Quarterly*', and in usages of this kind, the active verb is not far away: my circumstances *entitle* me to the compensation; Cox and Dyson founded a magazine and *entitled* it *Critical Quarterly*. When the word works in this verb-like fashion, it is formally incomplete until it arrives at its complement: the volume is entitled ... what? the claimant is entitled ... what to? The pure adjective, on the contrary, makes it possible to say that someone is entitled *tout court*.

In thus marginalising the word's adjectival potential, the *OED* is doing no more than reflecting its material. The verb can be traced back into Middle English and beyond; the adjective, with one or two technical exceptions, is not attested until the mid-twentieth century. Even now that it is fashionable, it is far from dominant. For instance, a recent searchable one-month run of *The Times* yields 50 occurrences of the word 'entitled', of which 31 are part of the phrase 'entitled to', 13 are synonymous with 'named', and only 6 are examples of the adjective.<sup>3</sup> It is, you could say, a niche meaning; it remains to be seen whether it will establish itself or start to sound dated.

The niche seems to have been originally carved out by a specific incident. The *OED*'s first citations, for the relevant sense of both 'entitled' and 'entitlement', are taken from the writings of the child psychologist Robert Coles, who in the 1960s and 1970s published *Children of Crisis*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning survey of the social and psychological condition of the USA's children.<sup>4</sup> He described the experience of childhood in various social groups and in the final volume turned his attention to the offspring of the rich. He insisted on the diversity of this

class: like any other cross-section of kids, they displayed unpredictably varying values, characters and degrees of happiness and unhappiness. All the same, he identified a particular mindset which they seemed to him to share, and his chosen term for this was 'entitlement'.<sup>5</sup>

It came out of a conversation with a lawyer in New Orleans, who was reflecting on his daughter's confidence that she would be in the Mardi Gras parade; his influence and connections in the city meant that she was, so to speak, entitled to expect a role in the celebrations. He remarked that this particular entitlement was only one instance of a more general acquired attitude: she was, and knew she was, similarly entitled to possessions, comfort, vacations, educational opportunities, and so on. This anecdote is exemplary from our point of view because it shows the adjective hatching out from the verb: the daughter's circumstances entitle her to such an assortment of things that one stops listing them and starts to think of her as simply an entitled *person*. Coles recognised the word because, as it happened, it was part of the vocabulary of the psychiatry in which he had been trained. The phrase 'narcissistic entitlement' was already in use to denote a kind of maladjustment in which a person's ability to form relationships is blocked by an anxious need for personal pre-eminence, unique consideration, the biggest share of whatever's going. To be sure, this condition is neither inevitable in well-off families nor peculiar to them; nevertheless, children brought up in luxury are the more susceptible to it (poverty breeds other kinds of narcissism). So the wealthy father's accidental echo of the psychiatric category pointed interestingly to the ways in which material inequality can have emotional as well as socio-economic consequences.

In other words, the term was interdisciplinary from the start. To call someone 'entitled' is to characterise them; it denotes a personality type, an individual who *feels* entitled to special treatment. This feeling becomes an object of clinical concern to the extent that it is irrational: it is when the subject has no such entitlement in reality that their belief in it constitutes a mental disorder. But it is central to Coles's argument that the 'entitled' children he studied are *not* deluded. At one point he mentions a boy whose father and grandfather are eminent lawyers and who is going to be a lawyer too. The child says, not that he 'wants to be' a lawyer, but that he 'will be' (58); he takes it for granted that on his path through Harvard into the legal profession, all the gates will open for him. This assumption may be annoying, but it is not pathological: they will. Thus the psychological force of 'entitled' is complicated by the fact that it has a sociological meaning too. The word inhabits two semantic fields at once.

Coles's deployment of the term has a second kind of complexity as well: it represents a suspension of value judgement. The 'entitlement' of the children he encounters may express itself in a grasping egocentricity which makes them both unpleasant and unhappy, but it may equally take the form of a sort of *noblesse oblige*: he meets young people who experience their advantages as an expectation that they should do everything well, and whose standards of behaviour are thus exceptionally high. He quotes a Black servant who is intrigued by the privileged children of the household where she works. You might expect them to be spoiled, she says, but if that means constantly demanding treats and television (this is 1961), then they are less 'spoiled' than her own children. Rather, it is that:

They act as if they're going to be tops in everything, and they're pleased as can be with themselves, because there is nothing they can't do, and there's nothing they can't get, and there's nothing they can't win .... They're not spoiled one bit, but oh, they have a high opinion of themselves! (64)

She is not sure whether this is a good way for children to be or not, and the author shares her uncertainty. So 'entitled' carries an ambivalence: it is carefully *not* a simple condemnation.

The word's journey from that rather subtle introduction in the 1970s to its currency today is not easy to trace. The *OED* assigns it to North America, where over the last decades of the twentieth century, it seems to have passed by degrees from technical category to colloquialism, as psychological terms sometimes do ('passive-aggressive', 'OCD'). In Britain, however, its adoption was both more belated and more rapid. To take another hint from archived newspapers, the *Daily Mirror* affords no examples of the adjective earlier than about 2020; until then, the paper used 'entitled' only in its participial form. But in the sample month which I invoked earlier (September–October 2023), there are about a hundred occurrences, of which over forty are in the new sense. Most of these are instances of popular usage in that either they appear in readers' comments, or else they are quoted from remarks made by members of the public in stories that have evidently been collected from social media. At least in this semi-public sphere, then, 'entitled' is something we have taken quite suddenly to calling one another.

What has most obviously got lost in this haste is Coles's avoidance of judgement. The word has shed its ambivalence and become uniformly, even furiously, pejorative. Googling 'entitled person' summons up a range of indignant 'how-to' guides – how to spot entitled people, what

makes them so nasty, how to handle them, whether to try and confront them with the truth about themselves. The word taps into a rather horrifying online reservoir of resentment. Accordingly, if speakers want to refuse the negative judgement, they have to refuse the word too: 'It's not "entitled" to ask for the bare minimum'; or 'we're entitled for suggesting it should be different ... I don't think so'; or 'It seems a bit entitled of her tbh' – in this last example not one but three ameliorating formulas ('seems', 'a bit', 'tbh') speak an uneasy feeling that the adjective itself is unacceptably hostile.<sup>6</sup> The same animus is vividly illustrated by a *Guardian* leader about the House of Lords: the Prime Minister, it declares, should stop the award of peerages and 'drive a stake through the system's entitled heart'.<sup>7</sup> Here, the allusive placing of the epithet makes it into a synonym for 'evil'.

You might expect that to moralise the word in this way would also desocialise it – that as it focussed on an objectionable individual, it would lose its general reference to wealth and class. And certainly one reason the word became so widespread so fast is that it attached itself to a kind of personal presumptuousness for which British culture already had a disapproving place. 'A bride-to-be has been branded "entitled" after asking her brother to contribute to her wedding fund and refusing to accept his £5000 gift'.<sup>8</sup> Brother and sister presumably belong to much the same social stratum; the adjective applies purely to the sister's character. But even a locution of this kind has its class overtones. The allegation is not after all simply that the bride-to-be is self-centred or grasping but that she demands things from the people around her as if she possessed some kind of recognised superiority. A few years ago one might have said, 'who does she think she is – Lady Muck?' In that expression, personal disapproval is already channelling a kind of anti-elitism, and this has arguably been amplified by the advent of 'entitled'. Its take-off in Britain coincided roughly with the fall of Boris Johnson, and when people call him 'entitled', which they often do, they are pointing both at his shameless behaviour and at his conspicuously privileged education, with the loose implication that the one is caused by the other. Moral condemnation is not separated from class hostility; they work together within the word.

This figure migrates easily from the politics of class to those of gender – in Johnson's own case, certainly, but also, for example, in the incident after the Women's World Cup Final in August 2023, when the President of the Spanish Football Federation, Luis Rubiales, gave the captain of the winning team an unexpected, unwanted, and highly public kiss on the lips. Although his behaviour was idiosyncratic to the point of weirdness, it prompted a social media denunciation of 'entitled' men which

aligned it with general structures of sexual inequality. The discourse shuttled between individual blame and systemic critique: the ‘entitled’ action was attributed to the ambient patriarchy which entitled Rubiales to perpetrate it, but the universalising explanation did not afford him any mitigation. He was uniquely guilty *as well as* culturally representative. Thus, the new power of the word to express personal dislike does not diminish its capacity for social analysis: in fact, its special power may exactly be that it allows the dislike to borrow the authority of the analysis.

The two-pronged attack is perhaps unfair, but that hardly matters when a wider unfairness is precisely its target. There is an obvious sense, after all, in which demonising the ‘entitled’ is a trope of broadly egalitarian politics: the objects of suspicion are inherited wealth, private education, nepotistic recruitment, institutionalised discrimination, and so on. If the beneficiaries of these things are embarrassed by the word’s popularity, so much the better. However, the word cannot be relied upon to stay in its place on the left in that partisan fashion. At the 2023 Conservative Party Conference, for example, the Freedom Association invited the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester to speak about crime and policing. The *Daily Mail* summarised his remarks like this:

Police chief: Crime is being driven by an entitled generation that has never been told ‘no’ – and who instead take pride in not respecting others. (9.10.23)

Here, the political force of ‘entitled’ swings effortlessly through 180 degrees. The problem with the ‘entitled generation’ is not its privilege, but its lack of respect for its elders; this comes about not because of material inequality but because too many parents are permissive and weak. The word’s associations serve to recharge an ancient tradition of authoritarian headshaking over the impertinence of the young and the fecklessness of the poor. As it turns out, moralising the word has the effect of opening it up to a right-wing agenda whose real content is social control.

The logic of this reversal can be found not only in use but also in the interior of the word itself. Its adjectival life is never completely autonomous: even when it is operating as a simple insult, it is shadowed by the question of what the entitled person is entitled *to* and what authority has conferred their entitlement upon them. In short, calling someone *entitled* is quite close to talking about their *rights*, and this implication is relevant, to put it mildly, to the discourse of a ruling party which has encroached upon a significant range of them – for example the right

to the vote, to asylum, to movement between countries, to free assembly, to the organised withdrawal of labour, to judicial review, to dental care. That illiberal programme runs the more smoothly if an unreflective verbal convention routinely represents entitlement as an inherently bad thing. Most parents probably don't want, and in any case can't afford, to bring up 'entitled' children. But that is not quite the same thing as bringing up children to claim the freedoms to which they are entitled. That is to say, the pejorative force of the word does not after all make it a progressive expression, only a populist one.

## Notes

- 1 *OED*, 'entitled' *adj.* 2.
- 2 "'Radical moves" at Royal Society of Literature prompt rebellion', *Guardian*, 27.01.24.
- 3 *The Times*, 25.9.23 to 24.10.23.
- 4 Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis*, 5 vols (Boston MA: Little, Brown, 1967-77).
- 5 This account is from a brilliant spin-off article: Robert Coles, 'The Children of Affluence', *The Atlantic*, September 1977, pp. 52-66.
- 6 Daisy Jones, *Guardian* 11.8.23; the second and third quotations from the *Daily Mirror*, 11.10.23.
- 7 *Guardian* leader, 13.8.23.
- 8 *Daily Mirror*, 16.10.23.

## Author Biography

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