

# EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With John Porter, author of *The Vertical Mosaic*

In 1965, a book came off the press that is still making waves in the Canadian social sciences. *The Vertical Mosaic* by John Porter is a meticulous analysis of class structures and power elites in Canadian society. It explodes the old myths that Canada is a classless society where any Horatio Alger can go from garbageman to the board of directors.

Porter, currently a professor of sociology at Carleton University in Ottawa, spoke with *Excalibur* writer Agnes Kruchio last week.

**EXCALIBUR** — Have things become better since the writing of the *Vertical Mosaic*?

**PORTER** — It depends how you look at it. I think there has been a very considerable expansion of education — an opening up of educational opportunities for the working classes. There hasn't been much change in income distribution, there has been very little change in the structure of elites. They have not opened up, they are very much the same elites.

It seems ethnicity does not matter as much now. The groups that go into the bottom layers change as immigration policy changes. It's the people who are less skilled — Portuguese, Greek, Italian or Caribbean workers — in the lower level. Now, it may be that in a generation or so, when their children start to make it, then other groups from other parts of the world will be featured in our immigration policy. So it's a kind of shifting mosaic with respect of who is in the places.

**EXCALIBUR** — How do you interpret the current rash of racist incidents [in Toronto]? How does racial prejudice fit into your scheme?

**PORTER** — That is difficult for me to answer, because it is a subject which I haven't really looked at, therefore my impression would be just impressions. However, I do think that racial and ethnic prejudice is very deep-rooted in our culture — and Canada has been traditionally able to claim to be holier-than-thou and criticize other countries for racial prejudice. While it's been a multi-ethnic society, it has not been a visible one, until very recently, when a large proportion of our immigrants came from the Caribbean. That has created a situation showing that Canadians are not that much different from other people. I think it's a very unfortunate development. I don't think it is being particularly helped by all the publicity given to it, because it does provide opportunity for people with strong feelings to come out and get publicity for what they're doing. What I think it does mean is that we have to make a very serious effort to look at race relations in this country in a new light, and our attitude toward the developing world.

There was a time when English and Irish immigrants were beaten up before the first World War — because they constituted a threat to wages — so there are economic factors involved.

**EXCALIBUR** — Macleans recently ran an article on the failure of the Western welfare state. The thrust of the article was that it was better to have it than not but that the welfare state is having serious problems.

**PORTER** — If the welfare state has failed, it has failed largely because of the failure to redistribute social and economic benefits — and it has failed to do that because the middle classes are very skilful at exploiting the provided services. They, after all, make better use of publicly supplied education, they don't get pushed around by doctors as much. They make greater use of hospital facilities than the working classes, who tend to regard doctors and teachers and so forth with some awe and respect. Another thing is the principle of universality which lay behind the welfare state, the principle that things must be available without a means test because the means test is a stigma. I think people now are looking at the possibility of returning to means testing, so there can be genuine

redistribution. If there are going to be publicly supplied services then they should go to those people who genuinely need them.

A good example is the student assistance plan, where students from better-off families should pay more. Perhaps it will mean the family won't be able to make that trip to Europe next year to keep the kids in university. Grants should be available to the less privileged groups.

I think that should be carried over to other aspects of the welfare state — means testing rather than universality. That's why the welfare state has become so enormously expensive.

**EXCALIBUR** — This may be an unfair question, but which would you consider more egalitarian — Canada or the United States?

**PORTER** — I never thought of Canada as being more egalitarian than the United States. In terms of opportunities, the United States is more egalitarian than Canada. They have more facilities for people if they want to get into the competitive structure, more opportunities than has Canada.

**EXCALIBUR** — For example?

**PORTER** — Education, for instance has always been much more available. I think Canada is changing in the last decade or so, but historically it has taken the wrong view. On the question of equality of education, I know that in Canada there are studies on income distribution that have shown that the United States is marginally more unequal than Canada with respect to income distribution.

Americans often say that Canadians are more equal because they have health services etc. That's illusory to some extent because our welfare system cannot redistribute wealth — the health services will not, because they are based on a set premium, and everybody pays the same — the marginal value of a premium to a low-income earner is of much greater value than the marginal value to a higher income earner. They are based on regressive taxation.

**EXCALIBUR** — How do you interpret the recent events in Quebec?

**PORTER** — The quiet revolution in Quebec of which the recent events are simply a continuation was a middle class revolution — a demand by well-educated French Canadians for an opportunity to get on in the world. The strength of separatism lies very much in the better educated younger age group in French Canada. The position of unions and of workers is somewhat ambivalent with respect to the Parti Quebecois.

So, in part, it reflects the low status the French had, and continue to have, in the occupational structure — and I suppose some people could interpret it as simply a logical extension of the gradual growth of nationalism. I don't have any special insight into the present situation in Quebec, nor does anybody. The French pundits — they really can't say either — everyone is just punditing, no one has any evidence.

**EXCALIBUR** — Will Quebec society be stable after separation?

**PORTER** — The whole question is whether Quebec could really go it alone. I don't see it as that a big problem. Its strength will be how this middle class will activate the class of Quebec society. As they have more opportunity themselves, they might syphon off some of their dissatisfaction into the work world and forget to activate the major, poorer, segments of the population — who after all, may be better off with Canadian family allowances and other benefits and may not want to separate. In terms of interpreting the events — it is still obscure what the forces would be.

**EXCALIBUR** — If education, as you have suggested in your lecture, does not in fact promote equality of opportunity, would you call popular education a failure? If so, would you support the Davis government in its withdrawal of funds from upper level education and putting them elsewhere?



Agnes Kruchio photo

There hasn't been much change in income distribution, there has been very little change in the structure of elites, since writing *Vertical Mosaic*

**PORTER** — No. In some respects, education has been a failure, in the way it failed to equalize opportunities in society. However, I think that to cut back educational institutions because they failed to equalize would certainly be the wrong thing to do. I would like to see much less emphasis on formal labor force preparation but nothing I've said suggests the abandonment of education or of cutting it back.

**EXCALIBUR** — There's been a lot of talk recently that today's students have lower intellectual standards.

**PORTER** — There is no evidence — it is one thing for people to talk about their impressions that standards have been lowered, but I think we would go back a generation, and we would find the kind of horror that older

generation had of the younger one. It's part of the generation conflict.

**EXCALIBUR** — You haven't found any of your students illiterate?

**PORTER** — No I haven't — I found my students to be surprisingly literate. Mind you, in conversation they have different speaking styles. In their written work, I don't know if they are any better or any worse than students were 25 or 30 years ago when I first started teaching.

I might add that in some fields, like mathematics, they are very much better... (government) enquiries in Ontario have indicated that their performance is generally very much better than formerly. In the language of our scientific and technological culture, they are more articulate, than in the other, humanistic one.