## The hoi polloi and the nouveau riche

#### By Michael Scannell

#### The fight is on

Apparently, some of the residents of Malibu, in California, are trying to reclaim their beaches from the film stars whose houses are on the front. The reporter I listened to was pessimistic about their chances. “They are up against the hoi polloi of Hollywood,” he said.

#### The *hoi polloi*?

I thought this was a bit strong: running down film stars in such a disparaging way. It was only when he went on to talk about “the elite”, as though that expression and hoi polloi were synonyms, that I realised he was using hoi polloi in the new way, with a meaning quite opposed to the older one. The reporter meant ‘posh people’—when the expression used to mean ‘vulgar people.’

What are we to make of this change in usage? Is it just an aberration? Or does it point to something deeper—a change in the community of English speakers, in the ownership of our language?

#### English?

I say ‘English speakers’, because although the words hoi and polloi are Greek, the expression ‘the hoi polloi’ is English—both in its old sense and in its new sense.

It was first used—to mean ‘the rabble, the common herd’—in the early nineteenth century. In England. Evidently, the owners of our language at that time felt the need to distance themselves from their dangerously radicalised lowers. How better to do it than to invent an expression which the rabble themselves would not understand, since it was in a classical language?

Of course it was a bit of bad luck for the people who needed the expression that the form which predominated was ‘the hoi polloi’. If hoi means ‘the’ in Greek, we shouldn’t use a second definite article. We don’t say ‘the l’amour’, after all. Poor old nobs. And no doubt ignorance of Greek has played its part in this reversal of meaning.

#### New social groups

So have much more interesting factors. We’ve invented a lot of expressions to identify social groups in the last few years: ‘Sloane Rangers’, ‘Essex Man’, ‘Mondeo Man’, and so on. These expressions are often used disparagingly; but they point to recognisable sets of people. It seems people also felt the need to point to a much wider group, made up of celebrities of every kind: sports people, the rich, the owners of country estates, designers, fashion photographers, members of royal families, pop singers, film stars. For those completely ignorant of Greek, who imagined it referred to something exotic (maybe hoi even reminded them of ‘high’?) the expression ‘the hoi polloi’ lay temptingly to hand.

#### *Hello!*

It’s not hard to see where all these different kinds of celebrity can be found jumbled together: in ***Hello!*** magazine. In fact, a useful new definition for ‘the hoi polloi’ might be: “the sort of people whose photographs appear in ***Hello!***”

I live in Spain and when, years ago, I first came across the English version of ***¡Hola!*** I thought it would never catch on. It was just too Spanish. The graphic design was so angular: so old-fashioned and continental. There was too much stuff about minor European royalty. Headlines had the air of having been laboriously translated from another language. No one in England would read it.

It seems that the Spanish family who own the magazines know a lot more about our modern world than me. In the days when debutantes ‘came out’, their pictures might appear in magazines like ***The Tatler***. ***Hello!*** extends the same kind of flash-bulb to its much wider group of celebrities. It shines with equal warmth on them all. The world-famous rub shoulders with new celebrities, manufactured by Big Brother and the like. People with generations of money behind them smile across the page at the nouveau riche.

#### The *nouveau riche*

This last expression, made up of two French words, is also English. Its use in England predates any similar use in France. And it was coined around the same time as ‘the hoi polloi’. It suggests that the newly rich are only a step above the common herd. Their kinship with the rabble will come out in the form of vulgar ostentation. Unlike ‘the hoi polloi’, this expression hasn’t changed its meaning. It’s just stopped being used. To the readers of **Hello!** it doesn’t matter when you got your money, or found your fame.

More to the point, the social groups who invented the two expressions are also losing interest in the distinction. Members of royal families, for example, no longer want to put fences between themselves and their neighbours. In recent issues of **Hello!**, Lady Gabriella Windsor and Zara Phillips do their best to ape Claudia Schiffer and Jade from Big Brother. These polloi are equally hoi.

#### Is elitism on the way out?

The sense that they are all the same kind of people brings with it, it’s possible, a recognition that they are all just suppliers of services and entertainers. Paid performers for the majority. Not their superiors.

If it does, it's to the good. Power, and not simply power over language, is steadily filtering downwards. The people once dismissed as ‘the hoi polloi’—like the ordinary residents of Malibu—are kicking against any lingering attempts to keep them from common territory. We should wish them luck.