

# Popular representations of the working class: contested identities and social change

**David Weltman**

**December 2008**

## **Abstract**

This review critically explores media representations of working class people and working class lives. Drawing on various studies, as well as other examples from different forms of media, it argues firstly that there is prevalence of derogatory images which undermine the emergence of valued independent working class identities. However, attention is also given to some - albeit exceptional - more contradictory representations which may indicate more progressive lines of development. One particular common stereotype which is highlighted is that of working class people's consciousness lacking potential for development except at the price of losing their working-classness. This, it is argued, is encouraged by the more general commonsense division between workers and thinkers, one which in fact goes against rich traditions of working class self-education. After discussing the educational implications of these observations, the review shifts to consider a recently intensified tendency in the media for 'defending', specifically, the white working class as an oppressed ethnic group. Different examples of this phenomenon are discussed in the light of alternative perspectives based on historical insights into the possibility for transcending divisions within the working class. In this way the emphasis on white working class particularism is seen to be in danger of reintroducing assumptions of working class stasis and of crippling efforts - including in educational settings - to tackle racist viewpoints.

In light of these arguments future prospects for how media technology frames working class identities, including the role of internet discussion forums, is explored. A historically informed perspective indicates the likelihood of social representations reflecting and refracting factors associated with a changing economic and political balance of forces, especially in a period of deepening global economic recession. It is in this latter sphere too, it is claimed, rather than in the technological setting itself, that one finds the fundamental factors shaping the challenge to stereotypes propagated through internet forum technologies.

**Keywords:** class, media, technology, identity, ethnicity, education, future

In any attempt to consider identity in the light of globalizing/localizing tendencies, the question of social class cannot be avoided for long. For these very tendencies have been accompanied over the last thirty years by dramatic unevenness of development, resulting in significant increases in inequality within the UK, and a continuing picture of severe economic polarisation across the world.<sup>1</sup> And yet the same period has seen the prevalence of claims that the importance of class as a central category of social analysis had much diminished. Such a paradox would arguably demand some resolution at a practical level of everyday cultural ideas about self and the world. In this regard, technological developments in communication and media spheres come to be of particular interest. But if, as appears the case, the history of technology bears witness to its Janus-faced nature – its liberating potential, yet at the same time its instrumental subordination to the reproduction of existing structures of inequality – so serious engagement with contemporary identities would seem to demand concrete examination of the specific multi-faceted relationships between media technologies and 'ideologies of class'.

Certainly, such technological developments have been trumpeted for their alleged egalitarian and democratic progressiveness. However, it is also arguably the case that much of the discussion about new technological developments in this sphere very often submits to the temptation to see these developments themselves as independent of wider societal conflicts of interest. In so doing, a tacit top-down standpoint is adopted which misses the ideological investment by dominant forces in such controversies. It is these issues which the current review seeks to explore with regard to media representations.

The question of popular representations of the working class appears to be currently attracting renewed interest following the fashionable silence on class characterising the 1980s and most of the 1990s (Kirk, 2007). What emerges from this body of work is the argument that, contrary to widespread claims for classlessness, or at least declining class division, the arena of media representations is an important site where the 'cold war' of class struggle is fought out (Skeggs, 2004). It will be argued that if this is the case then educators need to acknowledge the significance of this pervasive and tenacious ideological context, and draw appropriate practical and organisational lessons if the systematic reproduction of educational disadvantage is to be interrupted.

In focusing on cultural meaning-making as an important realm in which class division is produced, it is useful to initially spell out this review's underlying conceptualisation of class as an objective relationship. The working class, and indeed its political capacities, is viewed as a process of becoming. Thus what is fundamentally at issue are the complex dynamics of the 'working class-in-the-making' (Rowbotham and Beynon, 2001, p3). It is a standpoint which is grounded in a view of history as involving regular reshaping of the working class in accordance with wider economic and technological restructuring and its new productive requirements. This view aligns with the notion of class as primarily about one's *relationship* to the organisation of social production (Ste Croix, 1981). While always manifesting in complex and conditional ways through a variety of more or less transitory visible 'symptoms' - in the shape of different types of subjectivities, cultural forms and lifestyle behaviours - it is certainly not reducible to such things.

---

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank records some poverty indicators showing improvement, such as the reduction in absolute numbers living on a US\$ a day or less, which owe much to recent economic growth in China and India. However other indicators, such as GDP per person in sub-Saharan Africa, exhibit a backward trend. The International Labour Organisation also record some worsening statistics for the working poor in that 'their numbers have increased in low-income countries, but decreased in middle-income countries. There seems to be also a polarization between those low-income countries where the number of working poor are declining and those where they are increasing thus exacerbating world inequalities' (ILO, 2005).

The connection between this reshaping of the working class, and the latter's changing level of self-consciousness as a class, including as a political agent, is a much mediated one. But, essentially, a viewpoint which takes the working class as a process represents an important place from which to criticise common attempts to simply collapse the future into present states of consciousness; or, in other words, to conflate class as an analytic category into class as a category of consciousness: 'as long as unequal and exploitative conditions persist, there is a strong likelihood of an awareness of class refiguring, even though the manner in which a new consciousness of class will be expressed is not apparent' (Rowbotham and Beynon, 2001, p3).

## Frozen working-classness

It had been suggested that modern society is partly characterised by tendencies which work to *disorganise* the working class – economically, politically, and ideologically – as a class, including through 'pulverizing... [it]... into atoms easily manipulated by the bourgeoisie' (Lukács, 1924/1997, p66). Various studies of media representations appear to confirm this process - at least as it operates at the ideological level - including the negative implications for the availability of valued independent working class identities. By inflating the individualised cultural realm of personal relations, consumption and self-fashioning of the private self, a situation arises whereby certain subjectivities, cultural attitudes and lifestyles come to be treated as wholly definitive of class. Correspondingly, the formative role of material constraints becomes obscured (Crompton and Scott, 2005; Harry, 2004). Class, the studies claim, is both present, with, for example, television viewers led to negatively judge participants' assorted cultural and psychological *faux pas* from the stand-point of the middle class norm, and absent in that we have only isolated individuals with seemingly endogenous character traits, detached from any explanatory material circumstances.

Across a range of TV entertainment formats, including sitcoms, drama, and reality TV, common tropes through which working class people can be devalued relative to middle class identities have been identified. These include excess, waste and disgust; overly authentic; tastelessness; and lacking modernity (Skeggs, 2004). Recent detailed study of reality TV, for example, has shown it to offer an almost bottomless reservoir of scenarios for displaying the 'moral failure' of working class attitudes and self-management, such as in relation to child care or diet, for example. It is observed that while "lifestyling" is often mooted as one of the indicators of the demise of class... it is in fact one of the rhetorical techniques used to devalue working-class taste and culture' (Wood and Skeggs, 2007, p9). One witnesses then a class-based pathologizing of working class personhood and self. Although such studies do point to a few scattered moments of resistance to middle class evaluations, such moments only seem to confirm the overall atmosphere of futility. The final impression is a grim one of individuals trapped within unequal struggles over taste which they must almost always lose. Lawler refers to working class people becoming 'little more than personae in a bourgeois drama' (2005, p442).

More contradictory and less pre-closed scenarios do however emerge in other TV formats. A recent example is the series *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, documenting the efforts of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver to show how people in the working class town of Rotherham who previously did not cook themselves, can learn an easy recipe in a short time and 'pass it on' to others. On one hand, highlighting the significance of class in shaping people's diets appears not to form the official agenda of the program. And indeed, Oliver himself, when subsequently appearing in front of a House of Commons select committee on health inequalities, publicly rejected the notion that poor diet was a class issue: "There are plenty of City boys who earn – well, used to earn – a lot of

money who can't nourish their kids, even on a gold card... I can tell you it is categorically not about money or time. It's about knowledge... It is a poverty of being able to nourish their family, in any class"" (quoted in Pidd, 2008). On the other hand, and despite this classless orientation, the powerful effect of material conditions on people's dietary habits regularly bursts through in a striking fashion (Lawrence, 2008), as does the message that, contrary to some myths, working class people do not *want* to live on a diet of unhealthy food.

However, it remains the case that most of the time in the popular media circuits, the notions of change and working class consciousness is a contradiction in terms. There is a freezing of working-classness, such that future consciousness is identified with the permanently 'fallen' present, and temporally specific features appear as an inherent and eternal truth (Ollman, 1993). This erasure of potentiality for development is reinforced both by the one-sided perspectives in which people appear as psychologically fixed clichés and caricatures (Garnett, 2001); and by the invisibility of material and social conditions. But if there can be no progressive change *in* working class consciousness, it is often the case that the only solution to the 'problem' of this devalued consciousness is a change *out of* such consciousness by becoming more like the middle class (Lawler, 2000). And this involves adopting a version of individuality which represents the negation of working-classness. Thus while working-classness is always static (for change means negation of one's classed position), it is sometimes also inherent and eternally fixed and thus cannot be escaped from via religious-style conversion.

This is illustrated with respect to the theme of cultural development. In most media portrayals, if there is such a thing as working class culture it is not 'real' culture but rather 'non-culture' in the sense of lacking all intelligence and intellectual aspiration, thus being the opposite to a culture of the mind (Lawler, 2005). Indeed, just as historically there was a distinction in the Social Democratic imagination between the mindless mass resembling inert matter, and the benevolent saviour from above representing pure idea and spirit (thus standing opposed to the notions of working class self-consciousness and self-emancipation) (Draper, 1978), so in contemporary representations the qualities of the mindless mass live on in the now individualised framing of the (overly) embodied working class figure.

Again, either the person is incapable of cultural development (and the raising of consciousness in general terms), or if it does happen it must be at the price of losing that which underpinned their own class identity. One can note in this regard how the tenacious image of working class stupidity or 'buffoonery' (Butsch, 2003) echoes the consistent efforts of the British class system to draw 'a sharp distinction between workers and thinkers' whereby 'it was the prerogative of the latter to interpret religion, economics, society and literature for the former' (Rose, 2001, p7). Such an image is contradicted however by recent scholarship which has further unearthed the extremely rich history of autodidactic culture amongst the British working class (Rose, 2001). Whether through the Mutual Improvement Societies, or the Workers Educational Association (WEA), whole generations of worker-intellectuals were able to utilise the contradictions of culture in order to appropriate specific aspects of canonical 'Bourgeois' literature, theatre and music in a way which 'tended to ignite insurrections in the minds of workers' (p9). Such a movement for self-education through the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, often based on a suspicion of state provision or middle-class philanthropy, was driven by the realisation of founders of the Labour Party and other self-educated radicals that 'no disenfranchised people could be emancipated unless they created an autonomous intellectual life. Working people would have to develop their own ways of framing the world, their own political goals, their own strategies for achieving those goals' (p7).

The record of very many of the educated classes treating this movement with hostility, realising the threat which it posed to their own social position, justifies the founding

concern with defending intellectual independence. In this way they followed the balancing act whereby one 'has to learn regardless of the fact that learning carries certain dangers because out of necessity one has to learn from one's enemies' (Trotsky, 1960, p205; see also Au, 2007).

A survey of the continuing reproduction of the thinker-worker distinction in the media realm would need to include the process of decontextualisation of working class people such that they find themselves disorientated in a setting alien to their usual class-stamped milieu. Thus one could note the role of the technological setting of the TV studio in helping foster images of working people as fundamentally feeble-minded and rarely with thoughtful things to say about their condition and the world. This is expressed in the following section of an interview with film maker Ken Loach:

"He believes that TV and broadcasting should be about 'finding exactly what people have got to say rather than trying to confuse them into inarticulateness'. Instead the media usually 'works against people being articulate' by transplanting them into an alien setting, where they face unstated assumptions that cast them in predetermined roles.

'A television studio is a very hostile place. You can be an articulate person but not be able to express yourself in a TV studio. The lights are very harsh, and you're blinded. You are in a very strange environment, talking to somebody who is accustomed to a sound-bite politician. They won't ask the core questions; they will ask the ones that are superficial. So you have to change the question in order to make your point, and that's a skill in itself. If you put people in a situation where they feel at ease they will talk absolutely clearly. All you have to do is listen and ask the question that is central to the issue.'" (Rowbotham, 2001, p84)

Similar reference to the deployment of technological setting in reality TV to decontextualise people in the interest of devaluing them is also found in Skeggs (2007):

"Reality TV objectifies class by detaching persons from the set of relations (working-class) that make up their experience in the world, to place them inside another set of relations. Objectification is accomplished through the technologies deployed (camera angles, lighting, mis-en-scene, music, etc), performances, speaking to camera; all of which constitute aural and visual evidence about the person and their value. The technologies materialise a subject position. Personhood is bracketed out from the conditions of possibility through which it is constituted." (p17)

## **Media coverage of everyday work life**

Paradoxical though it seems, the other side of the coin to the counter-position of workers to thinkers is a severe absence of media coverage of working class people at work, as well as of the activity of associated institutions such as trade unions. In other words, central components of the daily lives of the large majority of a national population are treated as somehow not worthy of media attention. As such, yet another opportunity for class-based identification is closed down. The worker appears only as an abstract atomized citizen, rather than a concrete person occupying a specific position within social production. Kirk (2007) notes that 'it is the economic where the working class is, or should be, most visible', and that this 'accounts for the tendency within middle class discourse on class, going as far back as the nineteenth century, to discount or displace or simply mystify economic relations, not to mention emphasizing strategies to weaken and to attack working class institutions... spaces through which working class identities

might be voiced and celebrated' (pp.101-2). Martin (2004) argues that in the 'consumer is king' society, the news media adopts a frame summed up in the statement 'the process of production is none of our business', and 'collective economic action is bad'. Regarding the former, there is a clear preference for the process of production and work life in general to remain a hidden realm, with news characterising the lack of disclosure about this sphere as normal.

With reference to trade unions in the United States, Zweig (2000) claims that 'organizations of working people, especially unions, are systematically ignored or attacked' (p56). Similarly, despite British trade unions with their seven million members being the country's largest voluntary organisation, there is minimal coverage of their work. And where they are mentioned it is often in a way which exaggerates their decline, helped by a very inaccurate picture of a disproportionately male and white membership (Harman, 2008). Studies have also argued that in the rare moments of media interest trade unions are generally presented as only 'dispute' organisations, and that broader everyday aspects of their work in negotiating central aspects of economic life – not to mention other social contributions such as concerted anti-racist work - remain invisible (Walsh, 1988). Ken Loach goes as far as to argue that this media suppression helps ensure that the 'whole body of experience and ideas' represented by the Labour movement 'has no existence in our political and cultural life; it can only exist as an alternative' (Rowbotham, 2001, p85).

However, evidence suggests that even when there is news focus on work life its framing can still reflect the over-expansion of the cultural and the personal spheres. Thus stark working class realities may be obscured by nostalgic middle class fantasies about the lives of those working in traditional industries. Kitch (2007), for example, considered media coverage of a coal mine explosion in Sago, West Virginia in which 12 miners died. Through notions of working-class heroes, following their 'tough', 'proud' and patriotic vocational duties in the 'tradition of sacrifice' as part of the national 'family', the rural miners were made to bear the weight of others' romanticised expectations. Consequently, the working class disappears as a category with which to think about workers' experience. And the notion of working class identity as tied to a conflict of interests is undermined in favour of the suggestion of an essential industrial and national harmony. Thus the nationally told story of Sago was not one about the horrible conditions of mining and a deadly industrial accident' – one which was preventable if the proper health and safety regulations had been prioritised over cost-cutting – 'but one about life-affirming acts of faith and sacrifice' (p125) and 'down-to-earth people who stand for the best in all of us' (p128).

This example points to the particular susceptibility of workers associated with declining traditional industries to being represented in ways which reflect the needs of commodification. Stangleman et al (1999) trace this process with regard to ex-mining communities which can be mythologised in both positive and negative terms. Attracting inward investment, for instance, may require an emphasis on the supposed impressive work ethic of the ex-miners. In this sense the mining industry is framed within a heritage discourse (Dicks, 2008). Alternatively, attributing a 'culture of dependency' may fit nicely into a narrative of modernization, whereby 'backward' character traits of the labour force can be blamed for their alleged failure to embrace new working conditions. Again, therefore, essentialising of certain personality traits excises an objective picture of developing class relations in the context of specific social and economic problems affecting former coalfield areas.

Consistent with the lack of attention given to work-based existence and institutions is an over-inflation of the image of the underclass wherein the working class poor are confined to a degraded space peripheral to productive life and thus economic power. This then comes at the cost of obscuring the reality of the overwhelming majority of working class people in regular employment, with, for instance, most part-time workers being

permanent workers (Harman, 2008). A notable example of this underclass discourse is the recent concern with 'Chavs' (Tyler, 2007). In this case, immediately visible cultural markers such as purported habits of dress, lifestyle, deportment and speech come to signify a range of classic 'underclass' traits, such as dirt, sexual promiscuity, ignorance, psychological stasis, work-shy, aggressive masculinities, and over-fertile femininities – ones which continue the well-worn tradition of positing an existential divide between the 'respectable' and 'disreputable' working class. The overall result is that the wider context of significant rises in inequality, deindustrialization, the often sudden economic 'shock' experienced by traditional sources of employment, and cuts in welfare services (Thomas and Dorling, 2007), remain hidden.

It is notable that in addition to the role of traditional news outlets in helping to foster such images, there has been an unprecedented growth of internet forums, such as *chavscum*<sup>2</sup> and *urbandictionary*<sup>3</sup> dedicated to especially violent expressions of class hate. Tyler suggests that 'that the level of disgust directed at the chav is suggestive of a heightened class antagonism' (p18). However, it is also useful to include not only objective increases in inequality in the explanation of such class snobbery, but also a range of political attacks on the working class poor, which involve individualised scapegoating as part of a heightened political authoritarianism (Callinicos, 2001).

## Educational implications

These observations enable us to raise two broad issues with regard to education. Firstly, given that the study of media representations highlights various tenacious assumptions about working class people, it can help indicate how certain educational practices may confirm such assumptions and stereotypes, but also suggest how a school classroom can be an important site whereby such perspectives can be challenged. The second issue relates to the theme of the contradictions of culture – where, for example, the form and content of education will both express a middle class bias (Evans, 2006) at the same time as possessing aspects of a more universal value. In order for learners to access the latter, there is a need for educators to acknowledge the former, in the shape of respecting working class students' own cultural and historical particularities.

This points to a challenge to the above-mentioned narrative characterising individual development exclusively in terms of becoming more middle class. As against the long tradition of students facing a stark alternative of school success or continuing involvement in their neighbourhood and friends, various evidence from community schools and projects 'show that learning is enriched and achievement rises when schools build on the lives and interests of the neighbourhood... This is the challenge whenever communities are at a distance from the orthodox school curriculum' (Wrigley, 2005, p130; see also Ajegbo, 2007). A similar point applies to the language used in the classroom. Keeping any grammar – whether Cockney or Creole – other than Standard English outside the classroom was the norm for many years. But a growing body of argument has suggested that while general prejudice meant that 'Black and white working class students would face serious disadvantage without competence in Standard English, both spoken and written', such competence 'could only be achieved on the basis of respect for other forms of speech and encouraging its use for school learning' (Wrigley, 2005, p129).

A related point applies with regard to the highly standardised national curriculum, as well as more passive and disembodied forms of teaching and learning in general which replicates the same disorientating effect of the TV studio mentioned earlier. In the case of the former, by embodying a particular elite vision, it is highly likely to foster boredom,

---

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.chavscum-resurrection.co.uk](http://www.chavscum-resurrection.co.uk)

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=chavscum](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=chavscum)

frustration and disengagement unless spaces emerge for critical questioning of the nature of worthwhile knowledge.

Here arises also the constant danger whereby educational practices can provoke a situation in which educators' stereotypes concerning student's intellectual inferiority can seem to gain confirmation, and so guide teachers' perspectives, such that disadvantage is reproduced. This is especially pertinent with regard to the tendency for placing pupils from economically impoverished backgrounds, whose parents are less well educated or who speak little English at home, in 'low ability' groups. That these groups 'are likely to have a less interesting curriculum, based heavily on dull and repetitive exercises without any meaningful context or purpose' (Wrigley, 2006, p18), would in turn provoke resistant behaviour which seemingly reinforces the negative stereotypes.

Furthermore, the underclass discourse looms large in this respect. The more social and cultural distance between school and wider community/neighbourhood, the easier it is for teachers to 'generalise from dramatic incidents and conclude that the neighbourhood they serve is nothing but a concrete jungle full of dysfunctional families and drug-crazed youths.' Thus, any chance to appreciate the community for its positive features, including how its particular interests and social network can foster 'different patterns of learning' compared to the orthodox decontextualized classroom agenda, are likely to be sidelined (Wrigley, 2006, p69)

Finally, alongside the risk of excluding a specifically working class route to intellectual achievement, so also we have the appearance in policy of attempted accommodation to the traditional dichotomy between workers and thinkers with its pessimistic view of immutable consciousness. This is seen in the government's Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) whereby training for work is attributed the key role in making education more relevant and accessible for working class children. There is evidence that this has brought with it acceptance of unspoken limits on which children will be able to develop creativity, cooperation and thinking skills, and what they will be allowed to think creatively about. In this way, the universal entitlement of all students to gain a broad sweep of knowledge is sacrificed to the mantra of 'preparation for work'.

## **Anti-racism and the question of the 'white working class'**

In the previous section we saw how media representations commonly work against both the acknowledgement of structured class disadvantage, and also the development of valued independent working class identities. It was also suggested how related tendencies in the educational sphere can lead to pupil alienation and the reproduction of class-based segregation. In what follows these themes will be expanded by considering a trend in certain areas of media discourse to defend a particular section of the working class. In the process, the idea of working class identity as standing for potential progressive and dynamic unity across different national and cultural traditions is undermined. Such a situation provides further support for incorporating respect for the category of the working class within anti-racist practice in school.

As part of the academic criticism of media treatment of the working class, the racialised nature of some of the representations has been noted, especially the way in which particularly white working class people have been targeted.

"Whilst the term *chav* is a term of abuse directed almost exclusively towards the white poor, *chavs* are not invisible normative whites, but rather hypervisible 'filthy whites.' In a way that bears striking similarities to other national stereotypes of the

white poor such as the US 'white trash' figure, the chav foregrounds a dirty whiteness – a whiteness contaminated with poverty." (Tyler, 2008, p25)

There is evidence that there is significant ambivalence in representations of poor whites: on one hand recognising their intimate proximity – geographical, cultural, familial and sexual – with working class blacks and Asians (Tyler, 2007; Collins, 2004); on the other hand still portrayed in terms of an ethnically exclusive grouping. Critics have suggested that whiteness can indeed come in certain situations to signify the 'unmodern' – such that poor working class whites are portrayed as specially prone to racism and general cultural backwardness (Skeggs, 2004), thus becoming a vessel into which middle class racism can conveniently be projected. A seemingly primitive psychology thus becomes emblematic of the idea that the working class no longer exists as a viable or privileged political agency. Consider, for example, the following passage from an article by journalist Janet Daly in *The Times* newspaper:

"This self-loathing, self-destructive tranche of the population is far less assimilable into morally constructive social life than any immigrant group... Those ethnic minorities which bring with them religion, cultural dignity and a sense of family will find a way. The only bar to their steady progress will be the mindless hatred of the indigenous working classes, who loathe them precisely for their cultural integrity... I fear that long after Britain has become a successful multi-racial society, it will be plagued by this diminishing (but increasingly alienated) detritus of the Industrial Revolution." (Daly, 1994; cited in Haylett, 2001, p359).

One response to this sort of attack has been to defend white working class identity against what are seen as attempts to bolster middle class identities as precisely modern and forward-looking. And an issue is sometimes made of how the 'white working class' has been treated with embarrassed silence within an academic discourse primarily concerned with more 'exotic' oppressed identities. Haylett (2001), for example, in her analysis of the political rhetoric of welfare reform in the UK, suggests that the white working class is represented as embodying 'a poverty of identity based on outdated ways of thinking and being' (p352), and as such forms an obstacle to the development of the modern nation.

"[A] representative middle class is positioned at the vanguard of 'the modern' which becomes a moral category referring to liberal, cosmopolitan, work and consumption based lifestyles and values, and 'the unmodern' on which this category depends is the white working class 'other', emblematically a throwback to other times and places. This middle class dependency on working-class 'backwardness' for its own claim to modern multicultural citizenship is an unspoken interest within the discourse of illegitimacy around the white working-class poor" (pp364-5)

While there is a focus here on the gains for middle class identities, there is no expression of concern with the implications for working class identities. This includes the implications of a focus - demonstrated by the media, but also echoed in academic studies - on the white working class as a distinct identity separate from the working class in general. In fact, there is a danger that in defending 'white working class culture' it is illegitimately reified as an oppressed ethnic grouping; that an apparent defence of working class people may work to undermine the specificity of the category of working class as representing underlying commonality of interest between groups of workers.

This danger has been highlighted in the recent series of television programmes which have taken the theme of the marginalized white working class and given it a distinct slant which is arguably open to Far-Right political appropriation (Evans, 2008). BBC2's

White Season<sup>4</sup> series screened in March 2008, and carrying the subtitle 'Is white working class Britain becoming invisible?', presented a pessimistic picture of the post-industrial white working class as forming a hermetically sealed cultural unit under siege in a multicultural Britain. It was portrayed as resenting the loss of its identity and rights to its own cultural space to non-white immigrant communities in the competition for social welfare, and as banished to a voiceless wilderness of disenfranchisement and disorientation. This was the predominant framing of the series as a whole even though it was particularly three out of the series of five programmes which were most representative of this line: *Last Orders* is about a Working Men's Club in Bradford; *Rivers of Blood* considers the fortune of Enoch Powell's dire warning in 1968 about the social consequences of immigration and multiculturalism to Britain; and *The Poles are Coming* is about the tensions which are claimed to have been generated by recent immigration of East European labourers into Peterborough.

Richard Klein, who as the BBC's commissioner for documentaries commissioned the White Season series, explains his motivation in an article entitled: 'White and working class: the one ethnic group the BBC has ignored'. Here he argues that in the midst of the debate over the consequences of the changes in Britain over the last two decades wrought by globalisation, mass migration and economic upheaval, 'one voice has been largely absent: that of the white working class'. He notes a common perception of the white working class as 'reactionary or backward' whereas once they 'were seen as an integral and respected part of our national life'. The TV series is presented as a factual vehicle by which the white working class express their perception of themselves as what an interviewee in one documentary called 'the forgotten people'. Klein wished to convey the 'complexity of working class attitudes', for 'it is far too easy for the middle classes, who benefit from cheap labour – whether it be from a Polish plumber or a Ukrainian nanny – to fail to understand the difficulties facing the white working class'.

"In part as a consequence [of] multiculturalism, the irony is that many of the white working class see themselves as an oppressed ethnic minority too, and lower down the ladder than other ethnic groups on the hierarchy of victimhood. They complain of double standards and hypocrisy, pointing out that the media revel in telling stories [about] Asian and African immigrants, but ignores tales from the white working class. Every other culture, they argue, is revered except that of the indigenous population... they feel abandoned. I am in no way a spokesman for the white working class. But I think the message from the White Season is a troubling one. In the modern world's rush to embrace diversity and globalisation, we cannot afford to ignore the voices of any section of society which feels bewildered by the pace of change. If we don't give everyone a voice, it may only lead to further social division." (Klein, 2008)

In contrast to the concerns of radical film makers who have sought to give voice to excluded sections of the working class by highlighting the injustices and material and social fetters of class society as a whole (Bromley, 2000; Rowbotham, 2001), the issue is now transformed into one concerning competition within the working class for resources and recognition.<sup>5</sup>

This view of the white working class as an oppressed ethnicity seeking recognition is also found in another journalistic intervention which can be seen as part of the same tendency. Michael Collins' book entitled *The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class* (2004), based on his Channel 4 television documentary *The British Working Class*, is presented as partly inspired by the growing 'demonisation of the white working class', especially 'by middle class progressives who had traditionally come out

---

<sup>4</sup> See [www.bbc.co.uk/white/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/white/)

<sup>5</sup> See also the study produced by the Young Foundation entitled *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict* (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006) for a good illustration of this tendency.

fighting these underdogs' corner, or reporting their condition as missionaries or journalists' (p8).

Collins argues that the contemptuous portrayal of the white working class led him to write his book because 'it ignored both the detailed experience and the wider history of the white working class, and simply reduced them to a caricature similar to that in which they were cast centuries before' (p8). As against this he offers a history of the 'white working class that dominated the area [of Southwark, in South East London] for so long [and] ... the inside story of a tribe on a particular reservation and during a particular period, as told by an erstwhile native son' (p11). On the website for the Channel 4 documentary Collins complains that 'whites were not allowed the status of an ethnic group, and in the urban areas with which the white working class were synonymous, anything that identified them with a culture, a history, and a singular experience was omitted from any dialogue or literature that took multiculturalism as its theme'<sup>6</sup>.

What results is an exercise in essentializing white working class culture such that the rich historical processes of ongoing reconstitution of the working class through successive waves of immigration (Winder, 2005) disappear from view. This includes, for example, the key role of Irish (not to mention also Jewish) labour in the area discussed by Collins, and the central function of the Labour movement - especially during periods of heightened economic conflict - in breaking down ethnic separatism and encouraging class-based forms of occupational identification to come to the forefront (Davis, 2000; see also Virdee, 2000). Collins instead provides a deeply nostalgic and romanticized image which relies on very minimal coverage of the realities and struggles of workplace life. In this way, it 'flies in the face of historical-geographical processes of place and community construction and ignores the fact that cultures are just as relationally ("and dialogically") constructed as individuals, and a good deal more porous'. Consequently, what results is 'the building of a "particularist theory of justice" with respect to cultures as embodied *things*', thus advocating 'a politics that would effectively freeze geographical structures of place for evermore' (Harvey, 1996, p342).

It can be seen as simply one of the many historical examples of 'ethnic' divisions being invented arbitrarily through any range of different characteristics being inflated into an imaginary and determining essence called 'ethnicity'. One witnesses in particular varieties of the appeal which seem uncomfortably close to the rhetorical tropes of what Balibar (1991) terms 'neo-racism'. That is to say

"a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions; in short, it is... a *differentialist racism*." (p21; italics in original)

Here then is a discourse which illustrates how 'culture can also function like nature', as a 'way of locking individuals and groups *a priori* into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin' (p22). Furthermore, this discourse also proposes to explain racism as resulting from what is pilloried as 'abstract' anti-racism. Attempts to go against human proclivity to maintain our 'natural' cultural difference and particularity, will, it is claimed, inevitably result in eruptions of collective elemental aggressiveness.

The pertinent nature of these observations for grasping the underlying pessimistic assumptions of claims around the white working class is exemplified in a final study by Robson (2000) looking at Millwall Football Club. Here one can see the possible dangers of trying to defend what is said to be aspects of 'authentic' white working class culture against middle class hegemony. The study highlights the moral and cultural forms

---

<sup>6</sup> See: [www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/R/racedebate/talkingpoint/feature/michael-collins.html](http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/R/racedebate/talkingpoint/feature/michael-collins.html)

expressed by Millwall fans, including the 'rather menacing sense of carnival' (p228), traditional masculinities, and racist taunts, underpinned by the values of 'physical and personal inviolability, contempt for pretension, volatile emotionality and ruthless gallows humour' (p227). He suggests that this represents a working class identity which has resisted attempts by middle class 'outsiders' to introduce their own sets of values and standards. He argues that prevalent media characterisations of Millwall as a racist subculture manages to 'obscure the complex realities of relationships between Millwallism, identity and race' (p225). And he suggests that fans' resistance to anti-racist initiatives can be explained in the context of defending 'particular working-class identities and traditions':

"The central perspectives of Millwallism are implacably opposed to liberal culture. Anti-fascist 'stances' are associated with leftist local authorities and liberal progressivism in general. If, as I have argued, Millwallism is best understood as an expression of defensive but culturally entrenched opposition to bourgeois cultural hegemony, then a certain reluctance to embrace 'politically correct' moral perspectives is one of its central perspectives..." (p227)

Robson adopts a discourse of the rights of white working class Millwall fans to their own specific cultural traditions, traditions which middle class activists derogate for their backwardness, thus risking 'driving underground... white claims to pride in cultural identity' with the effect that 'new forms of aggressive nativism' (p229) may be consolidated.

"This highlights the complex ways in which Millwall is kept Millwall less out of white nativism pure and simple than a demand for the right to the kind of cultural particularism which is perceived as acceptable when practised by other groups than the white working class, and positively encouraged among them by the liberal/leftist culture of municipal anti-racism in inner London." (p230)

Rather than pointing to the potential for a progressive transformation of 'white working class' identity into 'working class' identity, and exposing the political factors which hold it back, the projected future is solely one of a struggle for recognition by eternally competing frozen cultural particularisms. There is little analysis in Robson's work of the wider context of economic decline and restructuring, nor of the role of external political forces, in forming an environment in which 'tribalist' divisions within the working class thrive (and often attract disproportionate media attention). This is despite the function of such factors in working in the interest of the very middle class hegemony which Robson is supposed to be targeting.

Furthermore, it is interesting that collective expressions of racism are explained by means of a particular version of crowd psychology which reintroduces assumptions about the immutability of working class consciousness. Thus the issue is one of provocation (by anti-racism) of people's aggressive instincts for maintaining cultural distinctness: 'The masses are presented with an explanation of their own "spontaneity" and at the same time they are implicitly disparaged as a "primitive" crowd' (Balibar, 1991, p23).

There have been attempts to transfer similar notions of the white working class into educational contexts – for example, the idea that one fights racism by affirming the particularity of culturally sealed collective units, as when it is argued that white working class youth should be provided with a reconstructed white identity (Fekete, 1998). By contrast, an alternative pedagogic approach to identity involves an attempt to take account of historical struggles to overcome conditions of economic and social degradation and of cultural segregation in the locality to which the school is tied (Fekete, 1998). The latter approach would then form a basis for understanding the origin of anti-immigrant themes which represent the corruption of the progressive traditions.

Consistent anti-racism involves both an emphasis on black and white unity, and an acknowledgement of the class relations at work, thus reasserting the importance of space for affirming independent working class identity. This issue of class simply can no longer be ducked. And against recent attempts to counter-pose the needs of Black and white working class pupils in a context of scarce resources (Mahamdallie, 2005), it is necessary to emphasise their common interest in well resourced education protected from the logic of market competition and associated managerial standardization. One of the challenges here is the way that segregating practices in which, for example, Black pupils are more likely to be put in bottom sets, reinforces stereotypes, including amongst students themselves, that they are the 'under-achievers' (Bennett, 2005).

All of these points would also require improvement in the shallow and tokenistic multiculturalism which has been previously offered: 'Traditional culture was frozen and dynamic fusions were overlooked. More than this, multicultural education often stopped short of challenging racism' (Wrigley, 2005, p130; see also Ajegbo, 2007).

## **Conclusion: some future trends**

The future direction in which representations of the working class may tend is tied to wider economic and political developments. On one hand, it is possible that continuing increase in inequalities and social polarisation, together with a growing authoritarian emphasis on criminalizing working class youth, and demonising welfare recipients, will find its corresponding supportive images in the media. In addition, various historical reference points indicate how, in response to growing popular discontent around the effects of economic recession, there is a strong probability of increasingly racialised representations, scapegoating the most vulnerable sections of the working class, and so functioning to weaken potential for building unity.

This could unfold in a direction indicated by the White Season documentary *The Poles are Coming*, which painted quite a dark portrait of apparently inevitable division and conflict between recently arrived immigrant labour and the host labour force. In this way, the extensive current examples of mixed workplace cultures and trade union efforts to recruit Eastern European workers as members and as full-time union organisers, remained out of view. We have also witnessed other attempts by influential social commentators to explicitly respond to economic recession by reasserting the role of the white working class as the 'true losers' who should be targeted with 'special measures' to make them 'more competitive' and prevent a seemingly natural resentment being targeted at East European or non-white beneficiaries of jobs and welfare services (Travis, 2008).

On the other hand, depending on the wider political balance of forces, not least an increased likelihood of a more co-ordinated trade union response to recession-related cuts in people's jobs, pay, and conditions (Harman, 2008), there is a fertile ground in which more class-conscious representations could flourish, marked by a greater historical awareness. This potential unity also finds its roots in the high levels of racial integration relative to the European average as measured at the levels of geographical neighbourhoods, workplaces, and the family, and the already deep commonalities in the lives of working class people of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds (Simpson, 2008). The role of the anti-war movement in building unprecedented political unity between Muslims and non-Muslims could also be a significant building block here.

Earlier on we saw how technology of various kinds - whether the TV studio, or the internet - provided means for reinforcing derogatory representations, whether directly in their role as dissemination hubs, or indirectly through predisposing participants to behave in ways which would seem to justify particular stereotypes. Despite the existence

of such examples, one can predict that ongoing triumphantist claims for technology as itself beckoning a more egalitarian or classless future will continue largely unabated.

Some additional remarks can be made concerning the prospects for both the propagation of derogatory stereotypes by internet forum participants, and for online efforts to challenge them. Despite early claims for the openness of online newsgroup technology as an alleged guarantor against the seclusion and uninterrupted self-confirmation of the worldview of groups fostering hate speech (Zickmund, 1997), this has been proven very over-optimistic. The reason largely relates to limitations of the Usenet and bulletin board format more generally in terms of fostering open political discussion. The lack of a moderating role, of accountability, and of engagement with those holding differing viewpoints, mean that provision of rational argument and supporting evidence can be simply bypassed by many users, and self-reinforcement dominate over interaction and exchange (Davis, 2005). Thus the prevailing tendency for personal attacks and harangues has often been commented on. Furthermore, online talk 'segregates participants into a multitude of narrowly specialised discussion groups... The internet, generally, produces severe audience fragmentation', and even 'when participants do interact, they often talk past each other without enough listening to others, particularly those with whom they disagree' (Davis, 2005, p123).

In cases where online reinforcement of shared stereotypes can grow in a symbiotic relationship with popular TV entertainment - such as the invented characters populating certain comedy programmes (Tyler, 2007) - then constantly evolving opportunities for apparently pleasurable dehumanisation flourish. Indeed, nourished by the heightened versatility of internet multimedia technology, and a social setting characterised by geographically disparate, isolated individuals, novel manifestations of the fetishistic fascination with the Other characterising colonial anthropology are made possible. Opportunities for resistance will depend on the relative resources of the demonised groups which, as, for example, in the case of working class poor, remain very limited. However, it is possible to envisage more hopeful scenarios, albeit ones which again are largely dependent on the trajectory of the wider working class movement. Nevertheless, it seems wise not to foreclose the possibility of such demonised groups following, in unpredictable ways, the example of stigmatised groups such as gays for whom internet forum participation may have contributed to a situation whereby identity 'demarginalisation' can take place and stereotypes debunked (McKenna and Bargh, 1998).

If there is a role for education here it may be partly signalled in the evolving pan-European co-operative development of more radical programmes of critical literacy skills. Such skills could be brought to bear on students' understandings of media images and the different interests at stake (Wrigley, 2006). And this could also beckon a greater willingness to embrace controversies and contradictions as part of the official teaching curriculum.

## References

- Ajegbo, K. (2007). *Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review*. Department for Education and Skills. Available at: [http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DfES\\_Diversity\\_&\\_Citizenship.pdf](http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DfES_Diversity_&_Citizenship.pdf)
- Au, W. (2007). Vygotsky and Lenin on Learning: The parallel structures of individual and social development. *Science and Society*, 71, pp273-298.
- Balibar, E. (1991). Is there a 'neo-racism'? In: Balibar, E. and Wallerstein, I. eds. *Race, nation, class: ambiguous identities*, pp17-28. London, Verso.
- Bennett, W. (2005). "They divide each to conquer both". In: Richardson, B. ed. *Tell it like it is: how our schools fail Black children*, pp170-173. London, Bookmarks.
- Bromley, R. (2000). The theme that dare not speak its name: class and recent British Film. In: Munt, S. ed. *Cultural studies and the working class*, pp51-68. London, Cassell.
- Butsch, R. (2003). Ralph, Fred, Archie, and Homer: Why television keeps re-creating the white male working-class buffoon. In: Dines, G. and Humez, J.M. eds. *Gender, race and class in the media: a text reader*, pp575-585. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage
- Callinicos, A. (2001). *Against the Third Way*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Collins, M. (2004). *The likes of us: a biography of the white working class*. London, Granta Books.
- Crompton, R. and Scott, J. (2005). Class analysis: beyond the cultural turn. In: Devine, F. Savage, M. Scott, J. and Crompton, R. eds. *Rethinking class: culture, identities and lifestyles*, pp186-203. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Davis, C.J. (2000). The elusive Irishman: ethnicity and the postwar world of New York city and London dockers. In: Alexander, P. and Halpern, R. eds. *Racializing class, classifying race*, pp87-103. Basingstoke, Macmillan.
- Davis, R. (2005). *Politics online: Blogs, chatrooms, and discussion groups in American democracy*. New York, Routledge.
- Dench, G., Gavron, K. and Young, M. (2006). *The new East End: kinship, race and conflict*. London, Young Foundation/Profile Books.
- Department for Education and Skills (2004). *Five year Strategy for Children and Learners*. Available at: [www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/5yearstrategy/docs/DfES5Yearstrategy.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/5yearstrategy/docs/DfES5Yearstrategy.pdf)
- Dicks, B. (2008). Performing the hidden injuries of class in coal-mining heritage. *Sociology*, 42, pp436-452.
- Thomas, B. and Dorling, D. (2007). *Identity in Britain: A cradle-to-grave atlas*. Bristol, Policy Press.
- Draper, H. (1978). *Karl Marx's theory of revolution: The politics of social classes*. New York, Monthly Review Press.
- Evans, G. (2006). *Educational failure and working class white children in Britain*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Evans, G. (2008). English nostalgia. *Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> March. [www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/12/communities.localgovernment](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/12/communities.localgovernment)
- Fekete, L. (1998). Let them eat cake. *Race and Class*, 39 (3), pp77-82.
- Garnett, T. (2001). Working in the field. In: Rowbotham, S. and Beynon, H. eds. *Looking at class*, pp70-82. London, Rivers Oram Press.
- Harman, C. (2008). Snapshots of unions strengths and weaknesses. *International Socialism*, 120. <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=483&issue=120>

- Harry, J.C. (2004). "Trailer park trash": news, ideology and depictions of the American underclass. In: Heider, D. ed. *Class and news*, pp213-229. New York, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Haylett, C. (2001). Illegitimate subjects?: abject whites, neoliberal modernisation, and middle-class multiculturalism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 19, pp351-370.
- ILO (2005). *Employment Analysis: Poverty, Income and the Working Poor*. Geneva, International Labour Organisation.
- Kirk, J. (2007). *Class, culture and social change*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Kitch, C. (2007). Mourning "men joined in peril and purpose": working-class heroism in news repair of the Sago miners' story. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24, pp115-131.
- Klein, R. (2008). White and working class: the one ethnic group the BBC has ignored. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-523351/White-working-class---ethnic-group-BBC-ignored.html>
- Martin, C.R. (2004). UPS Strike Coverage and the future of Labour in corporate news. In: Heider, D. ed. *Class and news*, pp262-280. New York, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mahamdallie, H. (2005). Is this as good as it gets? In: Richardson, B. ed. *Tell it like it is: how our schools fail Black children*, pp228-236. London, Bookmarks.
- McKenna, K. and Bargh, J.A. (1998). Coming out in the age of the internet: Identity demarginalization through virtual group participation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, pp681-694.
- Lawler, S. (2000). Escape and escapism: representing working-class women. In: Munt, S. ed. *Cultural studies and the working class*. pp113-128. London, Cassell.
- Lawler, S. (2005). Disgusted subjects: the making of middle-class identities. *The Sociological Review*, 53, pp429-446.
- Lawrence, F. (2008). Britain on a plate. *Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> October.
- Lukács, G. (1924/1970). *Lenin: A study in the unity of his thought*. London, Verso.
- Ollman, B. (1993). *Dialectical investigations*. New York, Routledge.
- Pidd, H. (2008). Obesity crisis fuelled by lack of cooking skills, Oliver warns. *Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> November.
- Robson, G. (2000). Millwall football club: masculinity, race and belonging. In: Munt, S. ed. *Cultural studies and the working class*, pp219-233. London, Cassell.
- Rose, J. (2001). *The intellectual life of the British working classes*. New Haven, Yale Nota Bene.
- Rowbotham, S. (2001). The subversive who surprises: Ken Loach. In: Rowbotham, S. and Beynon, H. eds. *Looking at class*. London, Rivers Oram Press.
- Rowbotham, S. and Beynon, H. (2001). Handing on histories. In: Rowbotham, S. and Beynon, H. eds. *Looking at class*, pp2-24. London, Rivers Oram Press.
- Simpson, L. (2008). Internal migration and ethnic groups: evidence for Britain from the 2001 census. *Population, Space and Place*, 14, pp63-83.
- Skeggs, B. (2004). *Class, self, culture*. London, Routledge.
- Skeggs, B., Wood, H. and Thumim, N. (2007). Making class through moral extension on Reality TV. Available at: [http://www8.umu.se/medfak/cgf/bev%20warwick%20with%20edits%20\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www8.umu.se/medfak/cgf/bev%20warwick%20with%20edits%20_2_.pdf)

- Ste Croix, G. de (1981). *The class struggle in the ancient Greek world*. London, Duckworth.
- Strangleman, T., Hollywood, E., Beynon, H. and Hudson, R. (1999). Heritage work: representing the work ethic in the coalfields. *Sociological Research Online*, 4. [www.socresonline.org.uk/4/3/strangleman.html](http://www.socresonline.org.uk/4/3/strangleman.html)
- Travis, A. (2008). White working class need help in recession, says Phillips. *Guardian*, 29<sup>th</sup> October.
- Trotsky, L. (1960). *Literature and revolution*. Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Tyler, I. (2008). "Chav mum chav scum": class disgust in contemporary Britain. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8, pp17-34.
- Virdee, S. (2000). Racism and resistance in British trade unions, 1948-79. In: Alexander, P. and Halpern, R. eds. *Racializing class, classifying race*, pp122-149. Basingstoke, Macmillan.
- Walsh, G. (1988). Trade unions and the media. *International Labour Review*, 127, pp205-220.
- Winder, R. (2005). *Bloody Foreigners*. London, Abacus.
- Wood, H. and Skeggs, B. (2008). Spectacular morality: 'reality' television, and the re-making of the working class. In: Hesmondhrough, D. and Toynbee, J. eds. *Media and Social Theory*, pp177-194. London, Taylor and Francis.
- Wrigley, T. (2005). A common struggle. In: Richardson, B. ed. *Tell it like it is: how our schools fail Black children*, pp127-133. London, Bookmarks.
- Wrigley, T. (2006). *Another school is possible*. Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books.
- Zickmund, S. (1997). Approaching the radical other: The discursive culture of cyberhate. In: Jones, S.G. ed. *Virtual culture*, pp185-205. London, Sage.
- Zweig, M. (2000). *The working class majority: America's best kept secret*. Ithaca, New York, ILR Press.

*This document has been commissioned as part of the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families' Beyond Current Horizons project, led by Futurelab. The views expressed do not represent the policy of any Government or organisation.*