

Declassing the Academy

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Welcome to the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Class and Culture*. The purpose of this journal is to locate the absent questions (and continuing problems) of class at the centre of academic discourse; to be a pole of attraction for working class academics, researchers' intellectuals and organisations; to re-establish the pedagogic value of working-class voices and to be a home for all those who wish to contribute to our understanding of the continuing relevance of class in the 21st century.

Achieving these aims demands the development of a theoretical, intellectually committed, and confrontational exploration and analysis of both class and culture. This means that by necessity and by preference this journal will be multi-disciplinary, intent on rejecting the rigid specialisms current within intellectual life (Boggs 2000: viii). One of the results of treating academic subjects and the research they generate as discrete self-contained areas is the fostering of a reified, fragmented view of (following Marx and Lukacs) the totality of class relations under capitalism. This leads, inevitably, to the inability of comprehending not only the theoretical but more importantly the social connections that exist between different areas of knowledge and the ways in which they relate to class and the reinforcement of class stratification.

For our analysis of class and culture to be truly effective, we must comprehend both relationally, across all disciplines. Contact with the social sciences makes it possible to understand culture as material and to consider the mediatory role it plays in the preservation and reinforcement of class inequality and the transmission of ideological values justifying that inequality. That is to understand culture in its broadest sense not as something static which can be taught or passed on but as a mode of production linked in historical and indelible ways to the struggle between classes. It is to recognise it as an arena of contestation both materially and ideologically utilised to organise the hegemony of dominant groups, but which nevertheless can offer the potential for something radical, something new, something not imagined before.

Our interest is in the ways class interacts, affects, and manifests itself within the cultural landscape not simply as a classification system based on what people wear or how they speak although these play a part in how we recognise class, but rather as a series of class stratified relations determining what is considered to have value and worth. It is to view class as a

means of positioning people within society and culture as a mediation of that positioning and how they interact in ways that generate social and political consequences for both individuals and societies. Identifying those consequences through the optic of class has become increasingly difficult due to the erasure of class as an analytical framework and the marginalisation and censorship of working-class voices within the public sphere. Erasing the language of class means it has become increasingly difficult to discuss the realities of class. The result has been an intellectual, cultural, and political vacuum that has been rapidly filled by an insulated bourgeois individualism, various ‘post’ ideologies and an entrepreneurial consumerist subject. So not only will our work be cross disciplinary but we will be drawing on a wide and diverse range of voices both academic and non-academic and encompass various methodological and epistemological approaches in the hope that the journal will provide a language with which to discuss class in all its complex and challenging ways. And in the process begin to shape a class-based focus, developing new theoretical perspectives and new methods of research which will draw out the complexities of socio-economic positioning and cultural formation.

Class structures are the scaffolding upon which cultures are built and experienced; dismantling that scaffolding means understanding class not solely in relation to economics or separately from how we think about and produce culture.

The foundational perspective of this journal is that class as a structural position cannot be properly understood merely as an abstract or theoretical category independent of how it is lived, felt, experienced, and represented, that is, without comprehending the ways in which class manifests itself through culture. Class is the expropriation of land – the gentrification of working-class areas – the existence of private schools – poverty wages – foodbanks; it is environmental degradation and the brutal global discrepancies in wealth and power. How we

react to the effects of a globalised corporate capitalism, how we choose to interpret and mediate the world around us through art, film, poetry, literature, politics, is culture.

This is not to collapse our structural understanding of class into a cultural one or to eschew a materialist engagement with the institutional nature of class inequality, rather it is to engage with how the various mechanisms work in tandem to reproduce and to legitimise classed inequalities, exclusions, and domination. Viewed from this perspective culture is an analytical category, focusing on dimensions of social reality to allow a closer inspection of the modes in which power operates in ways considered normative. It is also a methodological category, developing points of reference that allow us to critique the classed specificities of cultural phenomena.

Through this analytical and methodological lens, it becomes possible to situate culture within the material context from which it originated and to explore up close the systemic and institutional powers that reproduce class inequality. In this sense the project of the journal follows a cultural materialist endeavour of the kind advocated by Raymond Williams. A materialist concept of culture is one that rejects the idea that an emphasis on individual subjectivity translates into political activism or that class is a just one other 'identity' amid a myriad of identities which can be adopted or discarded at will, in the way that sociologists have found the middle class doing vis-à-vis working-class cultures. That is a very middle-class habitus (to use Bourdieu's term), one premised on the cultural confidence of media radicals and progressives that allows a strategy of disavowal and reverse esteem building by adopting the projected 'authenticity' of the subaltern class. While at the same time striking a moralising tone that constructs the working class as racist, sexist, and uneducated (see for instance many of the conversations around Brexit).

So, one of the aims of the journal is to challenge generalised representations of the working class, those that are held and propagated by the mainstream media and to dissect the

production of fixed images circulating in other discourses with little or no understanding of working-class life or of the damage caused by poverty, broken homes, institutionalized childcare, violence, bad housing, lack of education, and the alcohol and drug abuse that proliferate as a way of dealing with the struggle to survive. Bringing into focus the relationship between class and culture is an attempt to put some distance between received orthodoxies and constantly reproduced stereotypes around the discussion of class and to cultivate what we hope will be new conceptual and contextual tools developing both a more comprehensive understanding of the field of meaning as it relates to class and a bold critique of the systems, economic, institutional, cultural, and ideological that reproduce classed ways of being.

There is an urgent need to address how the deprivations of working-class life are decontextualized and pathologized by the middle-class expert and in the process become a 'moral' problem of working-class culture which can be addressed institutionally by imposing middle-class solutions, that is the imposition of middle-class value/tastes/ attitudes to solve that problem. These 'solutions' are doomed to failure because they fail to grasp the reality of working-class lives as they are lived within the relations of capitalism. It is in this space between what exists and what is represented that the tension between class and culture operates. The analytical intentions of this journal are premised on the knowledge that working-class life is mostly defined externally to the people who experience it and that any transformation of this situation is dependent on a critique that is generated internally.

In our present moment the political and cultural representation of the working class and their involvement in the public sphere in any meaningful or impactful way is in crisis. The very concept of class is in crisis and declarations of the death of class, accusations of class reductionism or any denial of the differences between the social classes need to be considered

as attempts to bypass the debate and further erase the concept of class as Evans and Tilley note:

claims about the demise of class differences and divisions do not fit with the plentiful evidence of continuing class-based inequalities of resources, opportunities and risks..... an extensive body of research confirms the continuation of pronounced class inequalities (2017:9)

Class, of course, has not ceased to exist, it is simply not spoken about in many areas of academia, within the political sphere or the dominant media. If class is not being spoken about, if its existence is being ignored then the injustices meted out to the working class daily can easily be (dis)missed. The political parties that at one time represented working-class people are intent on sustaining the neo liberal status quo while generally speaking the media sidesteps or masks issues of class. In academia there has been an intensification of research into the politics of race and gender but construed separately from their interaction with class. This is not to claim that an interrogation of such constructs is not important and necessary or that they are not sites of conflict but that there is a danger they contribute to a homogenous view of the working class, one based in the historically specific understanding of the working class as the white male factory worker allowing the working class to be consigned to the past at a safe distance where it poses no threat and in effect serves no purpose (Eagleton 1981:45). This dilution of a critical engagement with the politics of class has witnessed intellectuals, who once were the intermediaries of the working class, in the present neo liberal climate, anchored by their own field of experience and class disposition, fail to offer effective opposition to the present hegemonic forces. This lack of oppositional perspectives,

knowledge, and experience means continually repeated representations, with few alternatives, continue to be the way in which the working class is (mis)understood.

Capitalism is not simply an economic system although of course the social relations of production and consumption, our relationship to them and the unequal distribution of wealth are an integral part of the way in which our lives are structured. The class we are born into affects every area of our lives and as Marx made perfectly clear it is social conditions that shape our consciousness, our view of the world is shaped by our place within it and the class position we occupy. It is the embodied experience of class and the knowledge embedded within that experience that shapes not only our consciousness, but the school we attend, the ‘opportunities’ that are open to us, the kind of work we do, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, where we will live, even how long we will live. The terrain of classed experience is expressed through both the structural reality of class position and the ways in which class manifests itself in the cultural realm and entails a linking of the experiences of the social world with the ideological and cultural practices that correlate to class position.

Understanding class as both objective and subjective is to understand it as both an economic and cultural relation and to engage with the ways in which economic positionality manifests itself culturally. Therefore, it is imperative we give serious consideration to how “the relationship between culture and the economy is increasingly interconnected [...] given the growing move on the part of transnational corporations to monopolise the cultural space” (Herschmann quoted in Albornoz, 2015, p. xiii) which has resulted in a class stratified control of culture in terms of access and production and the highly unrepresentative nature of the cultural sphere.

It might be difficult to appreciate now but there was a time when the working class was considered important –when it was understood that class structured the machinery of the societies in which we live and work and when both politicians and the media in western democracies used them as a reference point for the implementation of policies such as the Welfare State that for a generation would make life for the working class considerably easier than it had been previously (Evans and Tilley 2017 :1)

The rise of Neoliberalism as a bulwark against working-class radicalism, as a political strategy, an ideological outlook and an economic model has resulted in a massive shift away from the agreements of the post second world war settlement. The revolutionary potential and collective strength of the working class, particularly during the nineteen seventies, their alliance with radical intellectuals who had come of age during the years of the counterculture, has slowly been diluted and effectively contained. Considered within the context of the shift towards identity politics (regardless of how the phenomenon is defined I would argue it is a symptom of late capitalism rather than a resistance to it) there exists a rejection, socially, politically, and culturally, of the politics of class with the result that we have seen the gradual and strategic erosion of the voices of the working class from all areas of the public sphere.

When and if class is discussed within dominant institutions, it is typically filtered through the perspective of the media pundit or privileged politician who statistically speaking is likely to belong to a privately educated elite with no experience of working-class life resulting in discussions often limited not only in scope but which are ‘inconsistent, shallow, and self-serving, (Umney 2018: 3). Increasingly known only through decontextualised appearances on reality TV shows or game shows where they are represented bereft of history or agency,

they serve the purpose of performing not just as a spectacle for television audiences in order to reinforce middle class prejudices, but as confirmation of a political agenda of derision and irrelevance smuggled in under the guise of entertainment.

On Being a working class academic

This Journal has not set itself an easy task. All reference points within the spheres of academia, the media, and political life are those of the middle class. Research has suggested that class bias is deep and unchanging. The struggle to have our voices recognised, to be able to theorize our different perspectives can feel at times insurmountable. As the title of Peter Shukie's article about why and how he organised a conference for working class academics suggests we will have to 'make this path by walking' it.

Shukie is concerned with constructing spaces that instil working-class academics with an intellectual and theoretical leverage in order to shape discussions of the working class on their own terms. And in the process articulate the relations of power within the academy and wider society, allowing for them to be discussed, explored, and explained. His article stages a confrontation between two kinds of discussions, discussions about the working class which can only take place on the ground of existing tropes reflective of social relations as they currently exist and in contrast discussions carried out by the working class themselves. These will of course take place on the same ground but offer a more effective dialectical framework within which to situate the discussion. This crucially important distinction identifies how conversations about working class people rather than *between* working class people results in their construction as marginalised or disruptive voices. When working class people control the conversation this is not the case, and their voices potentially have access to a knowledge of the world that dominant groups cannot have access to. This is made possible by drawing on the shared experiences anchored in their status as socially and historically situated

members of the working class and stands as evidence of the way in which power is structured and mediated. Shukie argues that across differences of race, sex, age, and other markers of 'identity' working class people have more in common with those of their own class than those of other groups. He questions the popular concept of 'widening participation' and asks why working-class people would want to participate in a space that has been granted to them by others. Why would they want to participate in a space that is alien to them and in which they often feel they do not belong? His is a vision of a counter public sphere (Fraser: 1990), a counter 'theorizing space' and begs the question of whether it is possible for not just working-class academics but the working class as a whole to have any influence or power within societies with no interest in abolishing the class distinctions on which they are premised.

The middle class has been a great conundrum for Marxism. The rise of the professional middle class was not something Marx predicted. A definition of class based on ownership/non-ownership of the means of production class allows the middle class to be subsumed into the working class. But this is a subsumption that only has some practical efficacy in those relatively few and short-lived moments of considerable revolt against the established order. And even then, it tends to be only a minority of the middle class who join 'the workers' revolution, while the revolution's dependence on the conservative bulwark of specialists and experts in the middle class threatens the return of some old hierarchies. For much of the rest of the time, and despite long-term trends that have pressurised middle class occupations with de-professionalising forces (such as new technology threatening to undermine higher education workers for example with online learning), the middle class have continued their struggle to preserve their 'distinctions' from the working class. Although the claim of the Occupy movements of some ten years ago that we all belong to a 99% joined together in the fight against the 1% was useful, it was also vague, ambiguous and suggests at

its core a degree of anti-intellectualism. While shining a light on the 1% brought to the fore the corporate and oligarchic elite who have amassed and who continue to amass vast unimaginable wealth, much of it stashed away out of sight from national governments, it is important that we do not homogenise the 99% theoretically or politically and recognise the crucial internal and structural differences which it is important we consider. Any emphasis on the 99% effectively renders the working class as (once again) non-existent. Rather than a tool against neoliberalism, in practice it contributes to the abandonment of the working class as a material category.

It is important, considering that decisions made by the professional middle class affect the lives of the working class in myriad ways, that we also analyse the middle class with the microscopic rigour applied to the lives of the working class. Traditionally there has been a distinct lack of research into the middle class, partly because they are considered the norm and partly because they have not developed the habit of self-reflection, which is why the journal welcomes research into the middle class. This is the subject of Katherine Liu's interview discussing her monograph *Virtue Signallers: The case against the professional middle class*. Liu indicts the liberal middle class for their 'hoarding' of virtue as a strategy of distinction, for the way in which they dominate both politics and culture within the public sphere and how they 'preach an individualism that obscures class but also act in their own interests in a very coordinated way'. That is why the struggles of the middle class to maintain their distinctions is as much of interest to the journal as research into the working class is.

One of the questions both her interview and her book raises is what does that mean for those of us born into the working class but who find themselves in professions dominated by the

middle class? Most of the articles in this first issue of the journal deal in one way or the other with this conundrum. The construction of a working-class presence within the academy is important if we are to initiate an orientation away from the individualistic and competitive environment in which academics are situated to a more collective one that provides causal explanations for what the essays in this journal demonstrate are shared experiences and acknowledge the value of working-class perspectives. In our quest to discover how structural positions rooted in economics and institutions are manifested culturally these essays deal with the educational, moral, and political aspects of culture.

As we navigate our place in the world, to make sense of what happens to us it is necessary to situate our lives within a framework from within which we can compare, measure, and evaluate but when there is a contradiction between who we are and the framework within which we exist, problems arise. What does it mean when the available ways of making sense of our lives involves selecting from meanings that have no value in relation to our history or social relations, when the frameworks offered to us have no logical coherence because they are frameworks built by others? If our sense of who we are is dependent on our relation to those others how can we make sense of a world in which we are not welcome? This sense of not belonging is the subject of R. M. Francis' article *Them and Uz - Harrison and Me*. His integration of the socio-cultural with poetry and personal reflection offers an insight into the liminal position occupied by working class academics and cultural workers

One of the ways in which this 'liminality' functions is to be found in the accusation of 'but you're not working class anymore'. This refusal to acknowledge our history, traditions and culture is yet another exclusionary tactic. If we are no longer working class, then what are we? Our lives may no longer be economically determined (if we have tenure that is -if we do not, we live from contract to contract often (under)paid by the hour), our educational status

distinguishes us from many of our peers, indeed often from members of our family, but we are not middle class, our experiences, our socialisation, our paths to and through academia are often fraught. As Francis points out in his essay, our likes and our culture are easily dismissed by the middle classes:

Working class is a thing - it's recognizable and observable. But it is not monolithic, and it is not fixed. Again, we're asked to tread the delicate line between things: tradition and progress, past and future, archetype/stereotype, and novel form, them and us.

This 'delicate line between things' is one that is observable in this inaugural issue of the journal itself. This is an academic journal, meeting the standards of academic argumentation and review, but there is a passion here, a fire, an indignation that will no doubt strike the middle-class subject as inappropriate. Never mind! This journal will risk entering such 'liminal spaces' in the hope we can transition to a more informed discourse and politics of class.

Clare's evocative article *The Decline and Fall of a Working Classicist* also deals with these feelings of alienation and lack of fit within the academy, combining as it does autobiography with a commentary on the neoliberal university. His interrogation of what it means to be a working-class academic in the discipline of Classics confronts the intentionally exclusionary nature of higher education. He explores how the neo liberalisation of the institutions of higher education has made life increasingly difficult for all those working in them but argues that being working class exacerbates those difficulties. His article illuminates how in theory, with the expansion of the higher education sector, it is easier for those from under privileged

backgrounds to enter the academy and so in principle are no longer excluded from academia but demonstrates how our exclusion is now a function within the system.

For working class cultural workers and academics, for any working-class person who finds themselves in a middle class dominated profession and for any working-class person who 'makes it', this will be the case as the professions are dominated by those from privileged backgrounds. This is particularly true of what has been termed the 'culture industries'.

Kenn's piece on being a cultural worker in an industry dominated by the middle class, the feeling of alienation, of not belonging, mediates the experience of being a working-class artist through a situated, auto-ethnographic lens. He combines the biographical detail of his own struggles with an analysis of the struggles and legacy of the work of Andrea Dunbar and Alan Clarke.

His piece draws on the struggle faced by working class cultural workers not only to get their work published /made/staged but also the ability to stand strong in the face of the inevitable onslaught from a bourgeois establishment who are resistant to your presence. Kenn writes about the lives and work of Dunbar and Clarke in ways that illuminate the contemporary condition of the working-class cultural worker. He draws attention to how it can never just be about being accepted within middle class circles and being allowed to speak, but like Shukie he claims it is also about creating our own framework within which to speak.

Our final article is a more conventional academic one in many ways, although of the type that will also have a place in the Journal. It moves away from the more biographical and ethnographic engagement of the previous articles to an analysis of intersectionality mediated through the optic of Gramsci's work, drawing attention to the fact that the working class have

never been a homogeneous undifferentiated class, but has been constructed through its intersection with other nodes of oppression such as gender and race. Gramsci was perhaps the revolutionary Marxist of his generation who did more than anyone else to think about the relationships between class and culture. In his article Carley focuses attention on the way in which Gramsci links subalternity to culture, drawing out the links between cultural traditions, beliefs and attitudes and social expectations and how he described ‘the *most progressive* and *most autonomous* forces as *subaltern*’. Crucially he draws attention to how, for Gramsci, the struggle against racial oppression could only be fought within the broader strategy of struggle against class exploitation.

The fundamental impulse of this journal and those who contribute to it is that social class exists. It determines the way we live our lives and this remains true even if we do not address it. As I hope has become clear the purpose of this journal is to disrupt some of the positions that ensure the continuation and stabilisation of the systems and processes that reinforce class relations. As consumerism and rampant individualism legitimise an intellectual and political public sphere where class is no longer considered relevant we hope these essays and this journal will revitalise our understanding of the importance of class because without such an understanding there is little hope of creating a more just and democratic society

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