



Classificatory struggles: class, culture and inequality in neoliberal times

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Abstract

The problem that the concept of ‘class’ describes is inequality. The transition from industrial to financial capitalism (neoliberalism) in Europe has effected ‘deepening inequalities of income, health and life chances within and between countries, on a scale not seen since before the second world War’ (Hall *et al.*, 2014: 9). In this context, class is an essential point of orientation for sociology if it is to grasp the problem of inequality today. Tracing a route through Pierre Bourdieu’s relational understanding of class, Beverley Skeggs’ understanding of *class as struggles* (over value), and Wendy Brown’s argument that neoliberalism is characterized by *the culturalization of political struggles*, this article animates forms of class-analysis, with which we might better apprehend the forms of class exploitation that distinguish post-industrial societies. Taking a cue from Jacques Rancière, the central argument is that the sociology of class should be grounded not in the assumption and valorization of class identities but in an understanding of class as *struggles against classification*. In this way, sociology can contribute to the development of alternative social and political imaginaries to the *biopolitics of disposability* symptomatic of neoliberal governmentality.

Keywords: class, classifications, culture, television, inequality, neoliberalism, Bourdieu, Skeggs, poverty, precarity, class struggle

The fate of groups is bound up with the words that designate them (Bourdieu, 1984).

Foreword: ‘Fuck Benefits Street’

Aust[ralian] election public sick of public sector workers and phony welfare scroungers sucking life out of economy. Others [*sic*] nations to follow in time. (Rupert Murdoch tweet, 2013)¹

On 6 January 2014, the British television channel Channel 4 screened the first episode of *Benefits Street* (Love productions), a six-episode reality television programme that promised to ‘reveal the reality of life on benefits [...] on one of Britain’s most benefit-dependent streets’ (Channel Four, 2014). The

ten-second opening sequence of *Benefits Street* begins with a camera panning over the rooftops of a row of terraced houses, a generic ‘view from above’ that establishes from the outset ‘the voyeurism of one class looking at another’ (Higson, 1996: 152).² As the shot pans across the roofs, a woman’s voice calls out the word ‘unemployed’ in a soft Birmingham (Brummy) accent. The shot then cuts to street-level, a young woman, dressed in a hooded top, jeans and a baseball cap appears, filmed from behind she is walking down a street, pointing to individual houses, while she chants in unison with a man (who is off camera), ‘unemployed, unemployed, unemployed’. Then an elderly male voice with a Caribbean lilt begins speaking off camera, ‘You see this street here, James Turner Street’. The programme cuts again, and the camera pans across the street revealing three men, two of them smoking in the doorway of a house, while a third, his face pixelated, approaches them in a hooded sports top. This is followed abruptly by a cut to a shot of a large pile of domestic waste in the street; split black plastic rubbish sacks lie under a tree spilling their contents across road and pavement as children play nearby. Chants of ‘unemployed, unemployed’ punctuate this sequence of visual shots. The elderly male narrator then appears in the frame and, speaking directly to camera in extreme close-up, he finishes his sentence: ‘this . . . used to be one of the best streets . . . now . . . one of the worst’.

Henry Giroux argues that contemporary life is characterized by a ‘biopolitics of disposability’ in which ‘poor minorities of color and class, unable to contribute to the prevailing consumerist ethic, are vanishing into the sinkhole of poverty in desolate and abandoned enclaves of decaying cities [and] neighbourhoods’ (Giroux, 2007: 309). In the UK, politicians have diagnosed this condition as ‘Broken Britain’: an ‘ideological displacement’ that, as Emma Dowling and Davie Harvie argue, enables ‘structural conditions of a deep social, political and economic crises’ to be imagined as problems of ‘individual behaviours’ (2014: 872). Through this ‘rhetorical device’ the deepening precarity of the post-industrial working classes is narrativized as a ‘moral crisis’ (2014: 872). The opening sequence of *Benefits Street* transports its audience into the powerful political imaginary of ‘Broken Britain’ (see Slater, 2014). From the programme’s title, *Benefits Street*, through to the montage of images of rubbish-strewn streets, unattended children, loitering youths, cigarettes and alcohol, hooded tops and baseball caps, interposed by a soundtrack of ‘unemployed, unemployed, unemployed’, the audience is instructed to reimagine the welfare state as a ‘benefits culture’ that impoverishes citizens, feeds addictions and creates what government ministers describe as fatal dependencies amongst ‘those trapped in its clutches’ (Smith, 2014). As a headline in current affairs periodical *The Spectator* put it ‘*Benefits Street* exposes Britain’s dirty secret – how welfare imprisons the poor’ (Nelson, 2014).

Producers at Love Productions, 70 per cent of which is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s global media conglomerate Sky, describe *Benefits Street* as a ‘documentary series’, ‘an honest depiction’ that ‘give[s] voice to a community that don’t really have a voice’ (Blackburn, 2014). However, television, as Pierre

Bourdieu reminds us, is ‘an industry which edits and organizes perception, offering visions of the world, classified, portioned and divided in specific ways’ (Bourdieu, 2011: 22, in Crossley and Slater, 2014).³ The accumulation and repetition of televisual figures of ‘the undeserving poor’ exerts powerful limits on the political imagination by establishing a consensus that Britain, in the words of one viewer, is ‘crawling with workshy malingerers’ (in thread response to Webber, 2014). In this way, programmes like *Benefits Street* establish new rules for the ‘audio-visual policing’ of precariat populations: the marginal, disenfranchised, the underemployed and the unemployed (Rancière, 1999: 29). The dystopian visions of ‘Broken Britain’ televised by programmes like *Benefits Street*,⁴ are used to ‘politically justify austerity policies’ (Dowling and Harvie, 2014: 875) producing scapegoats for the inequalities that unfold from the crisis of financial capitalism (intensified by the North Atlantic Financial Crisis of 2008). They are a reminder that the post-industrial working classes not only face precarious employment, downward social mobility, and extreme social insecurity, but endure conditions of ‘heightened stigmatisation [. . .] in daily life as well as in public discourse’ (Wacquant, 2008: 24–25). The production of class stigma plays a pivotal role in enabling class exploitation. More broadly, as I argue in *Revolted Subjects* (2013), national abjects, such as ‘the benefits cheat’, are mobilized as *technologies* of social control through which the transition from welfare to ‘postwelfare’ states is effected (Peck, 1998: 62). Furthermore, there is not only ‘political capital’ to be made from stigmatization: reality television production companies like Love Productions specialize in exploitative production processes, harnessing the labour of unwaged participants as ‘human capital’ to accumulate wealth for global media corporations. Indeed, *Benefits Street* achieved peak viewing figures of 6.5 million, making this one of Channel Four’s most popular, and most profitable, television programmes of the year: a spectacular demonstration of ‘accumulation through dispossession’ (Harvey, 2005: 116).

Claims that *Benefits Street* is a consensual and therefore an accurate depiction of ‘reality’, rather than the manufacturing of ‘reality’ for profit, are not only disingenuous but deny the harm these programmes effect. The political aesthetics of Broken Britain was not, however, passively accepted by the audience of *Benefits Street*. Indeed, over the course of 2014, *Benefits Street* emerged as the site of dense and fractious struggle, among the residents of James Turner Street, television producers, television viewers, politicians, newspaper journalists, television pundits, anti-poverty groups, policy-makers and sociologists.⁵

On 30 August 2014, a group of Middlesbrough⁶ football club supporters called ‘Red Faction’, unfurled a banner at the club’s Riverside Stadium which read ‘Being Poor Is Not Entertainment Fuck Benefits Street’ (see Figure 1). This protest against stigmatizing television depictions of people living with poverty was stirred by the arrival of a Love Productions television crew in the neighbouring post-industrial town of Stockton, which had been chosen by the company as the location for a second series of *Benefits Street*. Red Faction recognized that it is ‘no longer possible [. . .] to conduct social struggles without



Figure 1 ‘*Being Poor Is Not Entertainment: Fuck Benefit Street!*’ Red Faction Demonstration at Riverside Stadium, Middlesbrough, 30 August 2014.

having a specific programme for fighting with and against television’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 57). The chants of Red Faction on the football terraces that day were a retort to the chant of ‘unemployed, unemployed, unemployed’ with which *Benefits Street* opens. Under the glare of television cameras, their protest was an imaginative act of dissent against ‘the politics of disposability’ that characterizes the political present tense (Giroux, 2007). Indeed, the ‘Fuck Benefits Street Protest’ is emblematic of ongoing *class struggles* against the symbolic violence and material dispossession of ‘neoliberal capitalist domination’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 10).

Introduction: the problem of class

Sociological writing about social class invariably returns to the question, ‘What is class?’, but this is the wrong question. Instead, I want to begin by asking ‘what is the problem that “class” describes?’⁷ The answer is a surprisingly simple one, the problem that ‘class’ describes is inequality. Indeed, in whatever historical and geopolitical context they are uttered, class names (ie the elites, the rich, the middle classes, the working classes, the underclass), are names that variously reveal structural conditions of inequality. As Mike Savage argues in this issue:

there are numerous ways of examining stratification and inequality which do not require the concept of class. [Yet] it is important for sociologists to retain the term “class” in order to draw out the way that economic inequalities are implicated in wider social, cultural and political divisions. (Savage, this issue)

I would formulate this more strongly: *If inequality is the problem that class names, then equality is axiomatic to the sociology of class.* Class analysis is properly concerned with developing approaches and methods which might allow us to better understand and address the effects of class-based inequalities and the forms of exploitation which accompany and enable inequalities to be sustained and reproduced.

The transition from industrial to financial capitalism in Europe has effected ‘deepening inequalities of income, health and life chances within and between

countries, on a scale not seen since before the Second World War' (Hall *et al.*, 2014: 9). For example, since the 1970s Europe and North America has witnessed an extraordinary growth in income disparities and increasing numbers of people are living with poverty within wealthy states of the Global North. However, contemporary debates about rising inequality frequently side-step questions of class. One of the primary reasons for this is that the transformation of European labour markets from the 1970s onwards has raised 'in a pointed manner the question of the adequacy of the conceptual frameworks and analytical approaches inherited from an era of capitalist organization that is now bygone' (Wacquant, 2008: 249). Sociologists have struggled to make sense of the disorientating transformations in class composition effected by post-industrialization. At the same time, conditions of deepening economic and social inequalities urgently require class analysis if we are to comprehend the forms of exploitation that underpin the decomposition (and recomposition) of class relations under neoliberal conditions. This necessitates empirically driven sociological research on the increasingly precarious conditions in which those on the losing end of these processes currently live, including the impact of these changes on *both* working and middle-class populations, in *both* urban and rural contexts. It also needs – and we are witnessing – a new critical and empirical focus on the elites who profit from growing economic stratification (see, for example, Savage and Williams, 2008; Savage, 2014; Sayer, 2014). However, what is also required is a more fundamental theoretical revision of the epistemological foundations of class analysis itself. Not least since sociology as a discipline is 'deeply implicated in the work of group-making as its techniques of inquiry and analytic idioms are appropriated by political operators to project a falsely rationalized vision of their rule' (Wacquant, 2013: 4).

Understanding contemporary transformations in class-relations, through a class-based sociological lens, has been made more difficult by the three-decade-long struggle on the part of the elites to jettison class as the lens through which to perceive and contest social and economic inequalities (see Tyler, 2013). This attempt to 'decouple' inequality from class was vividly illustrated in Britain by the transformation of the Labour Party in the 1990s, from the parliamentary party of the working class, to 'New Labour' (that is, 'Neoliberal Labour'), a party that embraced financial capitalism and focused its policy efforts on privatization of welfare and the deregulation of financial markets. As then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, stated in a speech to the Labour Party in 1999: 'The class war is over. But the struggle for true equality has only just begun' (Blair, 1999).

The well-documented 'retreat from class' within sociology in the 1990s formed part of this movement to decouple class from the inequalities effected by neoliberal reforms (see Skeggs, 2004). For example, Ulrich Beck famously stated that class had become a 'zombie category'. In an argument that was first finessed by Margaret Thatcher (1987), he argued: 'Society can no longer look in the mirror and see social classes. The mirror has been smashed and all

we have left are the individualized fragments' (Beck in Willms, 2004: 51–52, 107). For Beck, contemporary society is characterized by 'capitalism without classes' where social inequality is 'individualized' (in Paton, 2014: 45). Beck's analysis is accurate in as much as one of the imperatives of neoliberal policies is class decomposition through individualization, involving intensive forms of government which stimulate competition over resources in every area of social life (see Clarke and Newman, 2007). In other words, one of the effects of the transition from industrial to financial capitalism is class decomposition, which means that people may no longer recognize themselves as belonging to an existing social class or positively identify with historic class names. In particular, there has been an erosion of the 'working class', both as an interpretative sociological lens, and as a political identity category deployed by people in everyday struggles against exploitation.

This process of class decomposition through class disidentification has been tracked by Tracy Shildrich and Rob MacDonald; through their empirical research with people living with poverty, they detail the ways in which hegemonic discourses that 'blame "the poor" for their poverty, create pressures 'to dissociate from "the poor" and the "welfare dependent" particularly in 'contexts where more solidaristic forms of working-class life are in decline' (2013: 287, see also Paton, 2014). However, this research also reveals how the idea of a pathological underclass, the class category which Shildrich and MacDonald's research participants are at pains to distinguish themselves from, gained purchase at precisely the moment when socioeconomic ideas of class lost credibility (see Tyler, 2013). In short, social class hasn't dissipated or dissolved under neoliberal conditions. On the contrary, classificatory struggles have intensified. *Inequality remains a matter of class*, even when it is not explicitly understood as such by those who perceive or indeed experience inequality. As Jodi Dean reminds us:

[t]he power of organized capital may well account for why few [...] think in terms of 'proletariat' and 'bourgeoisie.' But it does not prevent us from recognizing class, work, division, inequality, and privilege (although it certainly tries), all of which are visible, tangible, unavoidable. (Dean, 2012: 74)

Class, in whatever historical context or popular, technical or political idiom it is communicated (even when that idiom is articulating claims of classlessness), is a recognition of the unequal distribution of resources (economic and symbolic) and the accompanying processes 'of exploitation, dispossession, and immiseration that produces the very rich as the privileged class that lives off the rest of us' (Dean, 2012: 74). Further, in the same movement through which neoliberalism decomposes class relations, new class relations are composed, not least in struggles against the inequalities that neoliberalism effects. *This is why class struggle remains an essential point of orientation for sociology, if it is to grasp the problems of inequality today.*

Class as struggle

The political philosopher Jacques Rancière argues that the term ‘class’ is a homonym. What Rancière means by this, is that the concept ‘class’ is employed in ways that, while appearing to be describing the same thing, are actually conflicting in meaning. Rancière ascribes two primary meanings to the concept of class. In the first, governmental sense, class is understood as ‘a grouping of people assigned a particular status and rank according to their origins or their activity’ (1999: 83). In his second definition, class is ‘an operator of conflict, a name for counting the uncounted’ (1999: 83). That is, the political names, such as ‘the working class’, assumed by those in *struggles against* their given position in a social hierarchy. Many sociological studies of class are driven by the former social stratification imperative to measure, count, calculate, describe and compare historical transformations in class (and caste) structures. Stratification approaches to class analysis collect data (using a variety of methods) to produce knowledge about the relative economic (wealth) and social positions (status) of a population within a given time and space. As David Grusky summarizes:

the task of stratification research is to specify the shape and contours of these social groupings, to describe the processes by which individuals are allocated into different social outcomes. (Grusky, 1993: 610)

There are many disagreements between stratification scholars about the right ways to ‘classify class’ although the socioeconomic data most frequently utilized in stratification analysis is derived from measures of income, occupation and education. Despite disagreements, all stratification approaches can be characterized as “‘political arithmetic” class analysis, which involves fitting people into preordained classifications, in which the debates focused on the accuracy of the classifications or the accuracy of the fit’ (Skeggs, 2005a: 20). What stratification research often ‘forgets’ is that it is actively engaged in the formation and establishment of the class hierarchies that it describes.⁸

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984 [1979]) Bourdieu launched a significant theoretical and methodological challenge to social stratification scholarship, questioning the use of ‘statistics in objectivist fashion to establish distributions’ (1984: 482). For Bourdieu the main problem with stratification approaches is that they ‘necessarily put into parentheses the struggle of which [their] distribution is the product’ (1984: 245). In contrast, he argued that the classification of people can never be contained within objective systems of measurement, but is always the outcome of *struggles over and against these systems of classifications as they are lived in practice*. For Bourdieu, class is a relational concept, and social classes only emerge through struggles (against exploitation and inequality). As he notes:

When the statistician forgets that all the properties he handles, not only those he classifies and measures but also those he uses to classify and measure, are weapons

and prizes in the struggle between the classes, he is inclined to abstract each class from its relations with the others, not only from the oppositional relations which give properties their distinctive value, but also from the relations of power and of struggle for power which are the very basis of the distributions. (1984: 245)

Bourdieu's critical questioning of the epistemological foundations of classificatory systems is a foundational legacy of the very earliest sociological analysis. Indeed, one of the principal tasks of sociology is to attend to the principles of division in operation in a given social context, to pay heed to the power of naming, the symbolic violence of classifications and the performative effects of classificatory practices. As Claire Waterton reminds us:

Durkheim and Mauss [writing in *Primitive Classification* in 1903], were amongst the first to argue that sociological questions about the way in which we order and classify our world are important if we want to understand, first, how classifications are made, and second, what they do. [...] At the beginning of the last century, anthropologists were already making the move from thinking about epistemological questions concerning the 'truth' of classes (their basis in nature, so to speak) to more ontological questions about how classifications and their resultant categories create and sustain social relations. (Waterton, 2010: 152)

What *Distinction* contributed to the sociology of classification was a nuanced account of why and how hierarchies of social class persist, even under the ostensibly less stratified conditions of liberal democratic welfare states in post-war Europe. *Distinction* developed a nuanced, post-Marxist understanding of class formation, in which class hierarchies are shown to emerge not only in struggles between labour and capital, but in and through 'cultural struggles': whether these be through expressions of everyday 'tastes' or 'dislikes', 'the internalization of distinctive signs and symbols of power' and/or the acquisition of cultural competencies (Bourdieu, 1984: 282).

One of the legacies of *Distinction* is the array of conceptual tools it bequeathed to sociologists of class with which to examine the mechanisms through which classificatory systems are imposed and naturalized. For example, in *Class, Self, Culture* (2004), Beverley Skeggs draws on feminist and critical race theory to extend significantly Bourdieu's understanding of cultural and symbolic capital in an intersectional account of how bodies come to be differentially inscribed with value within contemporary social-symbolic circuits of exchange, creating not only classed, but gendered and racialized hierarchies of 'person-value'.⁹ Skeggs focuses on new formations of the middle classes as acquisitive, individualized and 'flexible' subjects of value. This normative middle-class self is the neoliberal subject *par excellence*, mobilized as a form of governmentality, through (and against) which judgements about class-others are produced 'within popular and political' imaginaries (Skeggs, 2011: 502). What Skeggs' work reveals, is that the meritocratic political imaginaries which Bourdieu argued mystified class relations in the 1970s have been displaced by more openly hostile forms of class othering. By the first decade of the 21st century, the working classes are openly depicted:

as abject and irresponsible, ungovernable, dirty white, pointless and useless, supposedly refusing not only to accrue value to themselves, but also represented as a drain on the nation and a blockage to the development of cosmopolitan modernity of others. (Skeggs, 2011: 502)

Skeggs' analysis bumps up against the limits of Bourdieu's conceptual framework here, for despite his emphasis on *class as struggle*, he fails to account for the potential of working-class resistance to discursive practices of othering. As she writes:

what Bourdieu cannot explain is the formation of any sort of personhood with value for those who are the source of labour, the non-propelling future-accruing subject with the wrong capitals, those who cannot access the fields of exchange to convert, accrue or generate value for themselves. For Bourdieu these subjects appear with negative capital, as lack, deficit, a void of value. (Skeggs, 2011: 502)

By way of contrast, Skeggs points to 'the existence of other alternative value formations' and details some of the strategies of 'value-reversal' class-others deploy against the stigmatizing judgments of 'capitalist subjects of value' (Skeggs, 2011: 504, 503). Drawing on ethnographic research, she reveals how under conditions of precarity, the working classes actively refuse 'middle-class spectral judgement[s]', and engage in practices of 'revalorization', characterized by forms of class solidarity in which 'relationships made from local, familial sociality where other people were supportive connectivities, not sources for self-accumulation' (Skeggs, 2011: 504). Through this research, Skeggs animates a more radical understanding of *class as struggle* and highlights the ways in which people activate alternate values with which to deflect and contest class stigma.

Skeggs' work has paved the way for a new generation of sociologists to detail both the effects of neoliberal class decomposition and the everyday strategies which people employ to ameliorate the impact of competitive individualism and social atomization. For example, in *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (2015), Lisa McKenzie explores how the residents of a deprived council estate in Nottingham engage local economies of value with which to secure themselves against external pathological perceptions and depictions of the place in which they live. McKenzie details how 'negative namings, "feelings of being looked down on", anger and humiliation, are absorbed into the self but can also act as signifying systems to push against' (2015: 112). In a related study, *Gentrification: A Working-Class Perspective*, (2014), Kirsteen Paton examines the mechanisms through which residents in the Partick district of Glasgow are coerced to participate in the gentrification of their community by becoming 'consumer citizens', even when this devalues existent class identities and creates antagonistic class-fractions, undermining 'classic forms of collectivism' (Paton, 2014: 185). As she writes, gentrification 'is used as part of urban policy to "gentrify people", that is, to make their subjectivities and behaviours more congruent with the neoliberal principles of the economy' (Paton, 2014: 40). By focusing on practices of 'class making' Paton's research highlights the gains as well as the 'hidden injuries' of

neoliberal class de/recomposition (Paton, 2014: 185). In turn, this allows us to reflect critically upon how the knowledge produced through classificatory practices shape (constrain and enable) the possibility of resistance to forms of class de/recomposition. Bourdieu is useful here, in reminding us that:

What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization. (Bourdieu, 1984: 479)

In other words, classifications are ‘not only descriptive of the world, they have consequences in the world and are “operative” – defining the possibilities for action and bounding one’s sense of agency’ (Waterton, 2003: 113). This definition of class is close, if not identical, to Rancière’s second definition of class as ‘an operator of conflict’ (Rancière, 1999: 83) where class is understood as *the struggles of the exploited against classification* and, more specifically, against the social destinies described and prescribed by ‘class names’.

Class as culture

One of the missions which sociologists can fulfil perhaps better than anyone is the fight against saturation by the media. (Bourdieu, 1998: 57)

Distinction teaches us that class struggle is always a matter of access to both economic and cultural resources. The ‘cultural turn’ class analysis initiated by Bourdieu was the focus of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project, *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* (CCSE) (2003–2006), and the findings of this project formed the conceptual basis for the BBC’s *Great British Class Survey* discussed in this special issue. I want to turn briefly to the CCSE study as it illustrates some of the limitations evident within current class analysis. In particular, I argue that Bourdieu’s dynamic understanding of class as struggles (that are increasingly refracted through cultural domains), is effaced by the stratification approach to class and culture adopted within this study.

The CCSE study drew on Bourdieu (and on a range of subsequent critical engagements with *Distinction*), ‘to examine the relative importance of cultural capital compared with economic and social capital in accounting for class differences’ in Britain (Bennett and Silva, 2006: 96). The substantive findings of CCSE were published as *Culture, Class, Distinction* (Bennett *et al.*, 2009), and confirmed Bourdieu’s thesis that ‘taste’ is a central means of distinguishing social groups, and is ‘clearly associated with a sense of social hierarchy’ (Bennett *et al.*, 2009: 210). Less clear in the published findings of this study, is how expressed ‘tastes’, and the classifying judgements which frequently accompany expressions of taste, are implicated in the perpetuation of class power and

privilege through symbolic violence. Indeed, while *Culture, Class, Distinction* provides insights into the persistence and salience of ‘cultural tastes’ in shaping hierarchies of status difference, the authors conclude that ‘there is little overt contestation and class resentment’ in neoliberal Britain (Bennett *et al.*, 2009: 252–253).

This claim is directly at odds with the highly visible resurgence of class-based antagonisms during the period in which this research took place. As Angela McRobbie has detailed, since the 1990s the ‘public humiliation of people for their failure to adhere to middle-class standards in speech or appearance’ has become acceptable and normalized in ways that ‘would have been considered offensive, discriminatory or prejudicial’ in the post-war welfarist period (McRobbie, 2005: 100). Indeed, for over two decades, sociologists and cultural theorists¹⁰ have systematically detailed the reanimation of distinctions ‘between the “deserving poor” and the rest, who [are] morally condemned for their fecklessness and immorality’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 79). In Britain, this resurgence in ‘class resentments’ was most notable in the emergence of the figure of ‘the chav’: a figure of youthful sloth, ignorance and welfare-dependence which became a ubiquitous term of abuse for poor urban youth during the late 1990s (see Skeggs, 2005b; Tyler, 2008; Jones, 2011).

If ‘class racism’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 78) became an ordinary feature of social life in this period, why did the CCSE study of ‘cultural capital’ conclude that there was ‘little overt contestation and class resentment’ in Britain? (Bennett *et al.*, 2009: 252–253). One reason for this disparity is the limited understanding of ‘culture’ employed in the CCSE study. Focusing on an idea of culture as ‘items’ and ‘products’, and proceeding from methods which pivoted on mapping people’s expressed likes and dislikes for particular cultural products, CCSE scholar Alan Warde was led to question ‘the capacity for cultural judgments to perpetrate and perpetuate social divisions’ at all (Warde, 2011: 342). As he notes:

If cultural hostility means one group disparaging another through their distaste for a broad set of cultural products, then it is not very prevalent in the UK. Dislikes are not, in themselves, evidence of intense or widespread hostility between social groups or categories. (2011: 363)

In the CCSE study, culture is understood as a diversity of ‘cultural products’, and ‘cultural capital’ is understood as expressed ‘likes’ and dislikes’. This definition of culture conceals the central role of symbolic violence in making class relations within and through culture. Culture is not only composed of ‘things’, but is a political economy. ‘Even the most material economic institutions have a constitutive, irreducible cultural dimension; they are shot through with significations and norms’ (Fraser, 1997: 15). The openly pejorative forms of class othering characteristic of cultural production in the period of the CCSE study are indicative of intense class hostility. If *equality is axiomatic to the sociology of class*, then it is the work of sociology to understand what this hostility

reveals about class exploitation and heightening inequality, and how this might be combatted.

The culturalization of class struggles

I began this article with Red Faction's protest as it illustrates the ways in which people are often acutely aware of 'the vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination' in which they are caught (Fraser, 1997: 72–73). People understand, in the words of a participant in *Benefits Street*, when they have 'been had'. Take Dee Roberts, the qualified mentor and support worker who was featured in the opening sequence of *Benefits Street*, pointing at doors chanting 'unemployed, unemployed, unemployed':

They have edited everything to suit their own needs [...] They said they wanted to film for a TV show about how great community spirit is in the street and how we all help each other out on a daily basis. They said that 'Britain was broken' but that I lived in an area where the community was very close. I participated in the show on that belief. But this programme has nothing to do with community, which you can tell from the title. It's all about people in the street living off benefits, taking drugs and dossing around all day. It makes people out as complete scum. They lied to us from the very beginning. We opened our doors and hearts to them and they violated us and abused our trust (Suart, 2014).

Dee eloquently identifies here the class exploitation at the heart of 'poverty porn' television production. She is fully aware, as Raymond Williams argued over 50 years ago, that the organs of mass communication 'were not produced by the working people themselves. They were, rather, produced for them by others, often [...] for conscious political or commercial advantage' and for 'the persuasion of a large number of people to act, feel, think, know, in certain ways' (Williams, 1960: 326, 322). Indeed, the claims made by media executives about the democratization of contemporary media forms, such as reality TV, have been carefully examined and contested by researchers. The appearance of a more 'diverse' range of figures on television 'as presenters, interviewees, documentary subjects, game show contestants and fictional characters' mystifies the fact that a predominantly privately educated elite have 'editorial control over the manipulation and presentation of those appearances' and that global corporations with powerful commercial and political interests control the 'production and distribution' of media content (Bennett and Tyler, 2010: 379). As Nancy Fraser argues:

Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life. The result is often a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination. (Fraser, 1997: 72–73)

The role of new media forms and genres, such as reality TV, in contributing 'to the transmission, legitimization and promotion of the distribution of unequal

resources and domination' (Skeggs and Wood, 2008: 560) was the subject of an ESRC-funded research project led by Skeggs and Helen Wood, 'Making Class and Self Through Televised Ethical Scenarios' (2005–2007). One of the most significant outcomes of this research was an expanded sociological understanding of television itself, as 'a frame of reference through which we and our forms of identity (as audience and potential performers) are increasingly and normatively mediated' (Wood and Skeggs, 2010: 94). What we learn is that when undertaking class analysis it is inadequate to examine televisual media in terms of either programme content or audience preferences alone. Television is not (simply) representational in respect of prevailing social relations and systems of value, but is fundamentally constitutive of contemporary social life. The media involved in the extension of television into the everyday include the various communication arms of government, the public relations industry and the global corporate networks of the mass media, run-of-the-mill communication systems such as the informal technologies of social media (blogs, wall posts, text messages and tweets) and the everyday chatter through which people 'weave the people, incidents and problems on television with their own lives' (Skeggs and Wood, 2008: 562). Television, Skeggs and Wood's research reveals, is a pivotal site of class struggle today.

This ground-breaking research has enabled sociologists to track how the media production of class stigma becomes imbricated within social-relations at every scale, including relations of the self. For example, the stigma that accompanies the televisual classification of the most disenfranchised populations within contemporary societies as abject, not only interpellates subjects 'from without' but is operationalized in everyday life as forms of 'class talk'. As Shildrick and MacDonald detail the cultural production of class stigma shapes 'how people living in poverty talk about poverty – in respect of themselves and others' (2013: 286). The 'powerful set of ideas' that denies poverty and morally condemns "the poor" originates in televisual sociality (2013: 286). These perceptual frames generate new 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett and Cobb, 1972), as 'inequality seeps through the skin' (McKenzie, 2015: 13).

While access to symbolic resources and processes of symbolic violence have always been central to the reproduction of class hierarchies and divisions, under neoliberal conditions the role of mediating agencies in legitimating inequalities is heightened. As Wacquant suggests, 'what is "neo" about neoliberalism' is precisely the ways in which it involves a 'reengineering and redeployment of the state as the core agency that sets the rules and fabricates the subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to realising markets' (Wacquant, 2012: 66). In order to 'realize' the social relations required by neoliberalism, namely acquiescence to a form of financial capitalism which benefits the rich at the expense of the rest, it was imperative that 'collective representations' of the structural causes of inequality were transformed. What distinguishes neoliberal media culture is that class inequalities are rescripted to appear a consequence of individual choices, wealth is 'earned' and poverty

is 'deserved'. Wendy Brown (2006) describes this shift as the *culturalization of political struggles*: 'a mode of dispossessing the constitutive histories and powers organizing contemporary problems and contemporary political subjects – that is, depoliticization of sources of political problems' (Brown, 2006: 16).

While I have focused on the impact of the culturalization of political struggles upon those at the bottom of the class structure it is important to remember that the precarity effected by neoliberalism is not confined to those living with poverty. As Joe Rigby notes, 'the antagonism between capital and living labour is no longer concentrated in specific places of work, but traverses the whole of society' (Rigby, 2014: 87). For example, during the current 'crisis' of financial capitalism, many once 'comfortable' middle-class workers also face extraordinary conditions of anxiety as workloads increase, established contracts of work are rewritten, pensions are devalued and they become subject to a dizzying array of technologies of surveillance and scrutiny. As Maurizio Lazzarato argues:

Contemporary policies regarding employment are policies that introduce degrees of insecurity, instability, uncertainty, economic and existential precarity into the lives of individuals. They make insecure both individual lives and their relation to the institutions that used to protect them. *It is not the same insecurity for everyone whatever the level and conditions of employment, yet a differential of fear runs along the whole continuum.* (Lazzarato, 2009: 119–120 in Rigby 2014: 159, my emphasis)

Emma Jackson and Michaela Benson have detailed the impact of neoliberal class de/recomposition on the urban middle classes, as they seek to find new ways to secure and distinguish themselves through symbolic and spatial articulations of class difference. Significantly, their ethnographic research reveals intensive forms of 'status discrimination *within* the middle classes' as well as articulations of 'violent intolerance' for racialized and classed others (Jackson and Benson, 2014: 1198, my emphasis). Understood from this nuanced cross-class perspective, the prolific cultural crafting of 'revolting' depictions of the working classes by middle-class media workers since the 1990s, and the reanimation of underclass discourses in political and public culture in the contemporary period, is symptomatic of a profound 'fear of falling' amongst the middle classes (Ehrenreich, 1989: 200). It is notable in this regard that after the North Atlantic economic crises of 2008 the figure of the *chav* was displaced in popular culture by both the austerity figure of the benefits scrounger *and* the much derided figure of the middle-class urban hipster. These class figures are pitted against each other, ruthlessly employed to divide people along a vampiric axis of blame for diminishing social resources. In short, as class inequalities grow, competition for economic and cultural capital, and accompanying forms of classificatory struggle, intensify. Read together, the emergence of new cultural figurations of the working and middle classes, along with the proliferation of everyday practices of status discrimination resonate with actually existing conditions of heightened precarity across a large swath of the class spectrum (see Hall and O'Shea, 2014 and Latimer and Munro this issue).

Conclusion: cross-class struggles against neoliberalism

This article has brought together a body of recent scholarship on class and culture, in order to make a theoretical contribution to the revitalization of class analysis in the context of ‘the current malaise of extreme and worsening inequality’ (Piketty, 2014: 101). What Bourdieu, Rancière, Brown and Skeggs powerfully contribute to sociological understandings of class struggles today is a reminder that demands for equality are demands not only for economic and social justice, but demands for redistribution within the fields of visibility and intelligibility within which class-based inequalities are naturalized, reproduced and legitimated. The nuanced understanding of culture as a political economy, and class as a political aesthetics, which emerges from this body of scholarship, has significant implications for class analysis within sociology, allowing for the development of much deeper understandings of the mechanisms of exploitation which characterize neoliberal modes of governmentality. However, sociologists still find it difficult to effectively communicate growing inequality through the analytic lens of class without appealing to essentialist ‘class names’. This returns us to ambivalent meaning of the concept of class, as a description of a given place in a social hierarchy and as a name for political struggles against the effects of classification.

Emancipatory struggles against class are often required to be ‘strategically essentialist’, in, for example, revalorizing positive working-class identities against pathologizing representations of a failing underclass. The ‘risks of essence’ have been the subjects of sustained debate in feminist, postcolonial and critical race theory and sociologists of class have much to learn from these debates (see Phillips, 2010). Fraser describes the dilemmas and risks of essentialism as a ‘redistribution-recognition dilemma’. As she notes, ‘People who are subject to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution. They need both to claim and to deny their specificity’ (Fraser, 1997: 16). At the same time, I want to argue that sociologists of class need to be wary of the ways in which the valorization of historical or existing class names and identities *and/or* the production of new classificatory systems, can limit our understanding of transformations in class relations. While Fraser makes a theoretical distinction between demands for recognition (recognition of the specificity of an existing ‘class’ of people) and demands for redistribution (calls for the abolishment of class divisions through the redistribution of resources), the approach to class-analysis I want to advocate wouldn’t attempt to resolve this contradiction. On the contrary, the interval between class understood as an identity, and as a descriptor for struggles against the inequalities which these identities name and prescribe, is precisely the axis from which class analysis should proceed. The most effective forms of class analysis are concerned not with *undertaking* classification *per se*, but rather with exposing and critiquing the consequences of classificatory systems and the forms of value, judgements and norms they establish in human societies. Sociology

might take inspiration here from the cross-class coalitions which characterize contemporary social and political movements against austerity: alliances forged through strikes and mass marches by public sector workers, solidarities between university students and cleaners and movements for economic justice, such as UK Uncut, part of a transnational network who undertake direct action to expose governmental and corporate tax-evasion, greed and corruption. As thousands of banners and slogans attest, these movements exhibit a growing cross-class consciousness of a common disenfranchisement: *No One is Illegal!*; *We are the 99%*; *Billionaires your time is up!*; *Human Need Over Corporate Greed!*

I want to end by proposing that the sociology of class should be grounded not in the assumption and valorization of class identities but in a more radical understanding of *class as struggle*. If equality is axiomatic to the sociology of class, then we must engage in *a scholarship of declassification*. In this way sociology can contribute to the development of alternative social and political imaginaries, since a genuinely alternative society will require a radical openness to new forms of class alliance against neoliberalism.

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Notes

- 1 Thanks to Karen Soldatic for sharing the Murdoch tweet made in response to the electoral victory of Tony Abbott's Coalition Government in Australia (tweeted at 3:03 PM, 7 September 2013).
- 2 This bird's-eye perspective is familiar to viewers of British soap-operas, where the title montage sequences whisk viewers from dizzy aerial perspectives, over rivers, city-scapes and rooftops before planting the viewer in streets, pubs, markets and domestic interiors which promise 'the drama of working class lives'.
- 3 Thanks to Stephen Crossley and Tom Slater for introducing me to Bourdieu's work on television. See their 2014 article for an important application of this work.
- 4 See Tracey Jensen (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) on the generic conventions of 'poverty porn', reality television programmes.
- 5 This struggle over these programmes was exemplified by the 'Does "Poverty Porn" undermine the Welfare State?' A public event held in Manchester on 6 November 2014, which brought together policy-makers, academics, journalists and the public to discuss the role of reality television in legitimating welfare reforms.
- 6 Stockton is a town in an economically depressed region of north-east England,
- 7 I am grateful to Joseph Rigby for inspiring my formulation of *the problem of class*, I was reading Rigby's wonderful PhD thesis as I was writing this article, and he also kindly gave useful feedback on a draft of this article.
- 8 Many sociological approaches to stratification delimit the time-space of class-analysis to the nation-state, or specific economic regions (Europe, North America) despite the increasingly trans-national character of world economic systems. What is bracketed out in the process is the massive and growing disparities between global north and the global south in terms of the exploitation of resources and labour and the channelling of surplus value towards the economic centres of the global north, with siphoned wealth and disenfranchised peoples

following centuries-old colonial routes to the imperial centres of capital (see Ifekwunigwe, 2004; Tyler, 2013). In this regard neoliberalism is distinctly neo-colonial.

- 9 See Satnam Virdee's (2014) *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* for a great historical account of the co-production of race and class in England.
- 10 For indicative examples see Haylett (2001); Skeggs (2003, 2005b, 2011); Lawler (2005); McRobbie (2005); Biressi and Nunn (2005); Raisborough and Adams (2008); Couldry (2008); Tyler (2008, 2011, 2013).

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