

# **The British class system is in great shape**

**Lisa Mckenzie**

*Why we should embrace working class solidarity not the  
gentrification of class politics*

The distinction between those that have middle-class avenues to power, education, wealth, and culture, and those that don't, is stronger today than any time since the second world war. Relatively well-paid and heavily unionised industries have been eroded from large parts of the North, the Midlands and coastal areas of the South. A decade of austerity budgets has severely impacted on working-class people, with the deepest cuts falling on the poorest shoulders, including children and the disabled.

Meanwhile policy connected to housing has felt the consequences of house prices increasing year on year, benefitting those that own property. Simultaneously the private, for profit schooling sector has been lucrative with rising fees and ever-better results – its students are still more likely than state educated students to be at Oxbridge and the Russell Group universities. These factors combine not to make class more complicated, as so often argued by politicians and academics, but rather more entrenched, more clearly delineated and more important than ever before.

**“Just as childhood poverty will be with us for at least another generation, so will the British class system”**

These are symbolic of the British class system – as well as a consolidation of what is now a deeply unequal and unfair society. Just as childhood poverty will be with us for at least another generation, so will the British class system. The depth of these divisions intensified during the 2008 banking crash, and then the policy of austerity that followed, but were unexpectedly blown wide open by the 2016 EU referendum.

## THE CLASS POLITICS OF FEAR: 1960–2000

Since the late 1970s, traditional industrialised working-class employment in factories, mines, steel works, and docks has been declining. Simultaneously, the unionised, predominantly working-class social and political movements have also declined throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The detriment is felt by both working-class men and women.

My own family suffered that double blow with the end of the country's mining industry and the manufacturing industry coming in quick succession. My dad lost his job in the early 1990s and many of the factories where my mum, my sister and I worked also closed down. My (then) husband, a working class Black British man – whose family had come from Jamaica in the early 1960s – was also struggling to find work against a backdrop of 1980s overt and institutional racism. Such racism devastated black working-class families just as the working-class unemployment rate was rising. The loss of manufacturing jobs hit young, working-class black men particularly hard.

On a personal level the last few years of the 1980s and early years of the 1990s were some of the hardest for my family. We were not alone – millions of working-class people suffered throughout the UK at a time when there was little comfort.

### **“Women told me about the misery of bringing babies home into very poor standard and run-down council flats”**

Years later, I undertook my PhD research in St Ann's, an inner-city area in Nottingham. I lived in a large council estate, which I had moved to in 1990 after leaving the mining community. The women I spoke to that were of a similar age to me recounted the end of the 1980s and the 1990s with fear. Women told me about the misery of bringing babies home into very poor standard of housing and to run-down council flats. The overarching story from mothers at this time was about the freezing cold that never left those flats, despite them living in a part of the country where millions of tonnes of coal sat beneath their feet. The fear of the cold was always matched with the fear of running out of food, or of clothing their children so they didn't 'look poor'. There was also a constant fear of 'authorities' – of housing officers, teachers, and social workers – people that could make your life impossible with one

stroke of a pen. Feelings of powerlessness threaded through every interview and every conversation.

## THE CLASS POLITICS OF FEAR: 2019

In 2019, after hundreds of interviews with working class people since my PhD in 2004, so much appears to have changed on the surface of how the UK looks and operates. Yet the narratives are always the same: full of fear, and precarity, and powerlessness. My most recent research with young working-class families in east London is about housing, and the impossibility for families to secure any kind of home. This is coupled with extremely low-paid work, which simply cannot keep up with ever-rising private rents and the increasingly shrinking provision of public social housing.

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The cruelty of austerity budgets throughout this decade make inequality and class struggle an inevitable and serious concern for policymakers, academics and, dare I say, politicians in the future. The damage that has been caused over the last 40 years has come without a real and concentrated effort to recognise it, to properly understand it, or to put in place long-term and cast iron policies that will tackle it. My prediction is that class inequality, and class distinction will continue to rise, deepen and exacerbate for at least another 40 years.

Over the last 15 years, we have been through many incarnations of policy narratives looking to explain inequality and the working-class experience: from New Labour’s concept of social exclusion, to David Cameron and the Coalition government’s ‘broken Britain’ to the post-Brexit narrative of the ‘left behind’. While politicians and policymakers try and find solutions to ‘fix’ working-class people, some of us [working-class academics] are focussing on the narratives around who the working class are, and the power relationships of the class system.

Steph Lawler’s (2008)<sup>1</sup> research gets to the crux of the concept of the condition of the working class as always being ‘lacking and in decline’, in that there once was a respectable working class who held respectable

1 Lawler S (2008) *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*, Polity

working-class values. They knew who they were and to what purpose they were assigned (2008 pp.136-137).<sup>2</sup> According to Lawler, this class has now ‘allegedly’ disappeared, part of it being absorbed into the middle class, whilst the other part has fallen into a workless and feckless underclass, living within a culture of poverty, and passing this deficient culture down to a new generation (2008 p.136).

**“To understand modern Britain, we need to understand how the working class has been squeezed, divided and encouraged to blame itself for its experience of poverty and exclusion.”**

Oscar Lewis’s<sup>3,4</sup> work in Mexico City and Cuba during the 1960s on the culture of poverty may not be an obvious choice when explaining the complexity of class and power in Britain today. However, Lewis’s work highlighted how practices in poor communities became cultures of behaviour often passed down through generations. This means a “culture of poverty has to be examined within the circumstances in which it develops”<sup>5</sup> (1961 p.151). Put another way, government-led policy implementation leading to generational poverty and inequality has had behaviour and individualised fault built within them, no matter which side of the political debate they are coming from.

And the cultural and group divisions have further split class communities, creating a race to the bottom of who is doing more badly and needs to more help from the state, from politicians or who is more worthy of their needs recognised. To understand modern Britain, we need to understand how the working class has been squeezed, divided and encouraged to blame itself for its experience of poverty and exclusion.

### THE ‘LEFT BEHIND’, ‘LEFT OUT’, AND THE ‘MYTHICAL’

During the summer of 2019 a policy brief from the Runnymede Trust was released titled *Class, Race and Inequality in Northern Towns*<sup>6</sup>. A month

2 Ibid, pp136-7

3 Lewis O (1961) *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, Random House

4 Lewis, Oscar. “The Culture of Poverty.” *Scientific American*, vol. 215, no. 4, 1966, pp. 19–25.

5 Ibid, p.151

6 Barbulescu R, Favell A, Khan O, Paraschivescu C, Samuel R and Varela A (2019) *Class, Race and Inequality in Northern Towns*, Runnymede Trust. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/employment-3/class-race-and-inequality-in-northern-towns.html>

earlier a report from Sheffield Hallam University, *The State of the Coalfields*<sup>7</sup>, was released. Both used social research methods to highlight inequality in working-class areas and among working-class people.

I do not comment on the merit of either but note a common approach to the ‘working class’ in their discourse. The way that working-class people are narrated through institutional systems like academic research, policy recommendations and political rhetoric is always that of ‘lack’ as both Skeggs and Lawler argue ‘lacking’ is the way that working class people are typically discussed in terms of ‘lack of taste’, ‘lack of parenting skills’, ‘lack of control’ and ‘lack of aspiration’.<sup>8</sup>

The Runnymede report argues that black and Asian working-class people since Brexit have been losing out in national and government focus and attention to their specific inequalities - relating to the intersection of their class position and institutional racism in northern towns in the UK. The argument is made that: “Brexit has been a significant focal point for discussion about the North but has mostly focused on a somewhat mythical ‘white working class’” (Barbulescu et al 2019).

I am not arguing that the research in the policy brief is untrue - quite the contrary. Working-class people in the north of England specifically have suffered multiple social injuries from the closure of important industries and the harsh cuts to public services. Ethnic minority working-class people, undoubtedly, suffer further from institutional racism and everyday racism they deal with from co-workers, customers, and the general public.

**“While it is encouraging to see the recognition that the working class is not male, it is uncomfortable to see policy and political discourse that ignores how connected working-class communities are”**

My issue with this brief is that it continues the narrative of ‘lack’, ‘decline’ and ‘division’ too often used in policy and political language - to the extent that the Guardian’s north of England correspondent Wolfe-Robinson M. headline was: “Obsession with white working-class fuels inequality in

7 Foden M, Fothergill S and Gore T (2019) *The State of the Coalfields: Economic and social conditions in the former mining communities in England, Scotland and Wales*, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

8 Ibid

north, study warns politicians not to neglect minorities' needs due to focus on 'mystical' demographic".<sup>9</sup>

The report itself, and the Guardian article promoting it, gives strength to that old narrative around 'division' and 'lack' – division as in government and politicians can only ever focus on one demographic at a time, and are propagating an injustice to one excluded group by paying attention to another. And lack as in promoting the race to the bottom narrative of who is doing worse – and therefore who deserves support and who does not.

What the report does not acknowledge is that the British working class has never been white - as in exclusively 'white and British' - and has always been a complex group of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and diverse people that share similar weak relationships to institutional power. Reports like *Class, Race and Inequality in Northern Towns* do the job they are focused on - which is to explain what inequality looks like in terms of home ownership, employment, and education. But they fail to understand the complexity of working-class communities in the UK.

**“My argument here is that the narratives used - the ‘left behind white working class’ and the ‘hard working but unappreciated ethnic minority working class’ - are both inaccurate.”**

Black, Asian, and white working-class people are more likely to live in connected communities. But too often I have read policy papers and political rhetoric about the divisions among working-class people that presents the 'left behind' white working class as ex-miners and ex-factory workers, and usually as male. By contrast, they typify the multi-cultural working class as younger, and more likely to be in the gig economy – the Pakistani taxi driver is often used as analogy. The problem with these types of analogies is that they give no room to the lived reality that in working-class communities, the Pakistani taxi driver is likely to live next door to the ex-miner, and their children likely school friends.

While it is encouraging to see the recognition that the working class is not male, it is uncomfortable to see policy and political discourse that ignores how connected working-class communities are.

9 Wolfe-Robinson M (2019) 'Obsession with white working class fuels inequality in north, study warns', *Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/15/white-working-class-fuels-inequality-north>

The commonality between both publications is that they recognise how British society is enabling some groups to benefit greatly in relation to other groups that are faring badly. My argument here is that the narratives used - the 'left behind white working class' and the 'hard working but unappreciated ethnic minority working class' - are both inaccurate. Both focus on what divides, not unites, the working class experience. The 'left behind' narrative of post-Brexit white working-class people represents them as a group unable or unwilling to catch up with modern, moving Britain. The stereotype of black and Asian working-class people as hardworking and underappreciated suggests their lives would be better if only politicians realised or cared more.

Neither tackles the structural inequality that unites both - the inequality and disenfranchisement entrenched in the experience of working class life.

**“The British working-class people are as complex and complicated a group as they ever were – people of all genders, all sexualities, from across all continents. Yet, at the same time, their lives are still filled with fear, and precarity”**

As we enter into a new decade it is important we learn from decades of division. How we speak, and the language we use about inequality is important. The British working-class people are as complex and complicated a group as they ever were – people of all genders, all sexualities, from across all continents. Yet, at the same time, their lives are still filled with fear and precarity. They are talked about as they have always been, in terms of lack, and immobility. They are pitched against each other, on gender, ethnicity or other lines.

I am not interested in the race to the bottom politics of class, I am interested in the class struggle. This means recognising the common experience of the working class – one where structures of power and privilege are propped up at their faultless expense. And it means solutions that are grass roots and working class lead, not solutions imposed by the current vanguards of political parties that gentrify class struggle in their bid to speak for us.

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