# CLASS AND CONTEMPORARY BRITISH CULTURE

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*For our parents*
*Ruth Lena Biressi and Alfredo Carlo Biressi*
*Sylvia Irene Winifred Nunn and Herbert Richard Hanslip Nunn*

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Some of the discussion of the underclass which appears in Chapter 3 has previously appeared in a different form in H. Nunn and A. Biressi (2010b). Some aspects of our discussion of class theory and cultural studies which feature in the Introduction appeared in briefer form in H. Nunn and A. Biressi (2009).

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# 1

# Introduction: Beginning the Work of Class and Culture

This book is about class and contemporary British culture, so perhaps we should begin by explaining what we take social class to be, for, as David Harvey (2005:31) has observed, it is a shadowy and dubious concept at the best of times. Here we understand social class as being formed through material conditions and economic (in)securities and as being shaped by early disadvantage or natal privilege and the uneven distribution of life chances and opportunities which these conditions create. But we also choose to recognise class as an ongoing social process experienced across our lifetime trajectories. For example, throughout our lives as classed subjects many of us are buffeted by a variety of changing socio-economic circumstances, which might be precipitated by family breakdown, redundancy, financial windfalls, exceptional professional success, and so on. All of these are also experienced in the wider context of economic eddies of boom, affluence and bust which impact on how we understand our current and future social roles. In addition, we will argue that classed subjects are shaped by the classed judgements of others and by prevailing political and popular discourses which often work to privilege, protect or normalise particular lifestyles, conducts and values. Bearing these various processes of class formation in mind, this book considers how *culture* works to classify, label and formulate class judgements. It aims to confront the ways in which culture articulates, frames, organises and produces stories about social class, class difference and its various attachments. These attachments include those explicitly connected to economic conditions and the material life (consumption, social mobility, social exclusions, work and leisure) and those linked to the interior life (hope, pride, shame, aspiration, fear and resentment), although it will be immediately obvious that these necessarily overlap. This is not a study of

British politics or economics, but it does locate cultural analysis within political and socio-economic contexts. We examine the ways in which culture intersects with the political in terms of its articulation of prevailing political philosophies and economic conditions such as the free market, meritocracy, neoliberalism, affluence, recession and austerity. This is not a work of sociology, but it does aim to take into account the continuing (if fiercely debated) significance of class labels and class stratification and the conviction that British social relations continue to include relations of class.

The adjective 'contemporary' clearly points to an inquiry into culture which is current, to its status as recent history and to its association with living memory. While this book considers the cultural landscape mostly from the perspective of the past decade or so, overall it situates this within a historical and political context bounded on one side by the arrival of Thatcherism and the political and social changes which followed in its wake. We make this move for a number of reasons. In social terms, the 1980s has been heavily cited as the decade in which already-foundering traditional class structures and class-based affiliations finally broke down, giving way to the more fluid and individualised social formations fostered by the processes of neoliberalism. In scholarly terms, within sociology, cultural studies and cognate fields, this was also the period in which the utility of class-based cultural analysis was being increasingly questioned and challenged. Finally, in personal terms, the 1980s were also the decade when both authors came to adulthood, so that our early working lives and political educations were lived and formed under Thatcherism, and our understanding of the processes of class formation was refracted through the experiences of this period. In sum, the 1980s were important for political, scholarly and personal reasons and we found, upon reflection, that these were deeply and perhaps inextricably entangled.

The personal starting point and backdrop to this deliberation of culture and social class arise from the two authors' divergent and common experiences and memories of young adulthood, work and political education during the decade of Thatcherism from late 1979 to 1990. In some ways it's difficult for us as authors of a book on class and culture *not* to read our early working lives, in particular, as anything other than emblematic of the 1980s, a decade which has been lived, and increasingly mythologised, as a paradoxical time of individual opportunity and deepening disadvantage, of meritocratic 'classless' social mobility and increasingly embittered class politics. Both authors were born into the very tail-end of the 'baby boomer' generation (1946–65), growing up in families whose parents' elementary education and manual or 'unskilled' jobs would help categorise them as socio-economically working-class. For many working-class people of our parents' generation, whose lives were interrupted by world war and whose career paths were stymied by their own and other people's social expectations, significant social advancement would have seemed fairly implausible, whereas by the 1980s a more fluid, more meritocratic society appeared to be emergent.

By the mid-1980s, under a second term of Conservative government whose return to office was borne up by victory in the Falklands War (1982), we would both be safely employed, even without university degrees, in jobs earning good money and with solid prospects. These middle years have been recorded in history as a boom time characterised by growing prosperity and increased social mobility. For many the deep and divisive financial recession of the early 1980s and the urban 'race riots' of 1981 were fading from view, although unemployment remained historically and injuriously high. In the mid-1980s Heather Nunn joined many other working-class people from the London Essex borders in the daily commute to the City of London to work in the Stock Exchange. As we go on to describe in greater detail in Chapter 1, this was a period in which the City and self-employed traders (many of whom were East End and 'Essex boys' along with South Londoners and those from the 'regions') began to enjoy excellent salaries and raised status. Many of these young men (and far fewer women) arrived following the City's 1986 deregulation of the Stock Exchange; a process dubbed the 'Big Bang' because it generated a dramatic spike in market activity through the introduction of electronic trading and the removal of distinctions between different trading operations. As Linda McDowell (1997:14–15) explained in her analysis of the City and social change, 'new forms of work based on the ownership, control, movement of and access to money led to the rise of new types of well-paid middle class occupations...'. She also noted that there was a widespread belief in the mid-1980s that expanded financial services would fuel a new economically secure future for Britain; a perception underpinned by the accelerated economic growth then taking place in the South East of England in particular.

City deregulation marked a significant redrawing of the cartography of social class, both within financial institutions and far beyond them into British society. As Ann Barr and Peter York (1982) explained in their best-selling lifestyle guide to upper-class culture and *mores* called *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook*, for the established upper classes the City

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had traditionally been a place of discreet money-making. They noted (1982:11): 'The City is magic money... Brass without muck... There's something about the way the City works – the oldness, the public-schoolness, the merchant bank "word is my bond" code of honour – that makes it all seem like an ancient profession.' This was a predominantly male, white, upper-class and reportedly breathtakingly sexist environment where power and authority were exercised without diffidence or any degree of self-consciousness. But following the Big Bang, electronic trading and a more global orientation and accompanying importation of American business values helped to refashion City recruitment practices in more open ways, even though old attitudes were dying hard. After the mid-1980s, established 'gentlemen' financiers, whose families had worked in the City for generations, were forced to rub shoulders with *declassé* interlopers in the joint enterprise of making London the dominant financial centre of the global marketplace. But younger traders also continued to count among their numbers the usual type of highly privileged Oxbridge graduates. As David Harvey (2005:62) remarked: 'Class power had not so much been restored to any traditional sector but rather had gathered expansively around one of the key global centres of financial operations.' As McDowell's (1997:68 and 147) early 1990s fieldwork demonstrated, this collision of social groups did little to ameliorate its masculinist and elitist culture, in which dress codes and everyday conversation referenced public school, military or sporting codes; in her words, everyday talk was all 'bats, balls and bullets'.

The City became increasingly emblematic of a wider world of opportunism, conspicuous consumption and social aspiration as its operations helped to produce a new class of *nouveau riche* whose earning power was boosted by bonuses and who were less discreet than the old school when it came to spending them. Popular culture and the arts parodied or critiqued the new visibility of money and the acceptability of greed as a driver of national prosperity, although the intended irony was often missed or knowingly over-ridden by its targets. So, the Pet Shop Boys' 1985 pop song called 'Opportunities (let's make lots of money)' was embraced as an anthem of the 1980s' golden prospects to get and spend: 'Oh, there's a lot of opportunities/If you know when to take them, you know?/There's a lot of opportunities/If there aren't, you can make them.' Likewise, in 1987 Caryl Churchill's (2002) bitingly satirical play *Serious Money* was attended by cheering City financiers in droves. So too the later comic character Loadsamoney, who lampooned working-class greed and flashy hyper-consumption, was promoted as a hero by the tabloid press whose readers he explicitly mocked, and he was also championed by City traders who appreciated his barefaced greed.

At around the same time as Heather Nunn was working in the City, Anita Biressi began work as a Local Officer in a South London branch of the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS). As a public sector employer at the lower levels of the Civil Service, it included a far greater number of women and ethnic minorities than did the City, including the descendants of first and second-generation immigrants from Kenya, Uganda, Jamaica, and so on. Their task was to process and assess claims for Supplementary Benefit. This was a means-tested benefit paid to people on low incomes, including the elderly, the sick, single parents and the young and/or long-term unemployed. At the DHSS and in the Unemployment Benefit Offices (UBOs) welfare systems were struggling to cope with the damage wrought in the first-wave recession of the early 1980s, in which unemployment had reached 3 million and inner-city youth unemployment had reached 50 per cent (see Taylor-Gooby 1988). So, too, the 1980s were a time of increasing turbulence in patterns of employment, which 'finally buried the belief in the permanency of work' (McDowell 1997:14). At this time the Thatcher government was working hard, in the face of considerable opposition from both within and without, to cut back on state obligations in areas such as the universities, health care and social security (see Harvey 2005:61). The Conservative government's commitment to reforming welfare systems and ending the 'dependency culture' was implemented through legislation which broke the links between benefit rates and inflation and between pensions and earnings and which cut certain other entitlements, restricted benefits to strikers and their families, and so on (see Giddens and Griffiths 2006:370, but also Reitan 2003:99). Many of these initiatives actually increased the numbers of people reliant on means-tested benefits. Pressures on both claimants and staff also increased as staff numbers failed to rise in line with the growing numbers of claimants and much-needed resources were redirected to investigate benefit fraud and abuse (see McGlone 1990:161).

As Beatrix Campbell (1984:212ff) observed in her book *Wigan Pier Revisited*, claiming the 'dole' was often a demoralising, sometimes shameful, experience which sapped energy and optimism. The desperation of the unemployed and the bureaucracy of job centres and UBOs during the first recession was memorably highlighted in Alan Bleasdale's TV drama *The Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC2 1982). Other TV dramatists such as Phil Redmond chronicled the struggle to secure waged work over longer story-lines. His series *Tucker's Luck* (BBC2 1983–85) followed the coming of age of a group of young people under Thatcherism, and his Liverpool-based soap opera *Brookside* (C4 1982–2003) consistently included stories focused on union activism, redundancy, unemployment and debt. Campbell noted that this was also a time when many DHSS officers were badly disheartened by the process of claims administration and were often radically politicised in the workplace and beyond. It was not uncommon, for example, for union representatives to bring collection boxes into the workplace in support of the UK miners' strike of 1984–85, a lengthy and bitter dispute which still looms large in public memory.

Contemporary accounts of political activism, such as those written by Campbell, together with feminist memoires signalled the rebarbative tone of the public political arena. The socialist agenda seemed somewhat impervious to feminism, women's interests and women's active participation, let alone to the growing appeal of Thatcherite values to working-class constituencies. Campbell (1984:2–3) remarked in the midst of the shifting and fraught political landscape of the 1980s that 'the eighties remained an enigma', observing that 'already we know more about the rise of the radical new Right than we do about the demise of the old Left.' It seemed to Campbell (p. 230) then that it was those *outside* the political institutions who, for better or worse, were 'changing themselves and changing their class' rather than those for whom politics was a public duty or a profession. Some perceived that the class politics of the 1980s was an increasingly esoteric or combative or exclusionary practice; it did not always speak effectively to its more 'natural' constituencies, which included, for example, working-class women and black and ethnic minorities (see Bryan *et al.* 1986:146ff, Cockburn 1991, Smith 1994). Urban DHSS claims offices could be highly politicised places. But the class politics enacted there was often either macho and militant or overly intellectual, mobilised through an intimidating combative rhetoric of 'class war' or sanctioned political tracts with which female and minority colleagues struggled to engage. Writer Clare Ramsaran (1990:174) recalled that even the media images of the period were predominantly of confrontations between men, with women placed on the sidelines. In her view, the media deployed 'various aspects of British manhood: the rioter, our "brave boys" sailing off to the Falklands, and the stroppy striking miners being put in their place by the boys in blue'. For Ramsaran (p. 175) and many others the arrival of Margaret Thatcher did the very opposite of inspiring a united opposition; instead, her appearance created 'a whole new excuse for men on the left to stop feeling guilty about sexism…Thatcher jokes were so much more acceptable than plain old misogynist ones. And if you didn't laugh you weren't just a humourless feminist, but... a TORY' (see also Brunt 1987:22–4).

In various ways, then, in the City, in the public sector and in left political activism, the public scene was complicated not only by class, but by gender and race. Moreover, left politics, in particular, seemed to have misjudged the investments that women and their families were willing to make in the transformative potential of new Thatcherite times and the 'compromise with capital' which was taking place (Campbell 1984:229). For example, cultural historian Carolyn Steedman (1986:6–9) explored through her own family history how her mother's 'proper envy', desire for worldly things and an ongoing sense of the 'unfairness of things' became articulated with her working-class Labour background to produce a working-class Conservative. Her mother was very far from being an isolated case. The decade of the 1980s was marked by rising inequalities of income and status, but these were cross-hatched by a political rhetoric of choice, entrepreneurialism and individual aspiration towards social mobility which seemed to make sense for many people (see O'Shea 1984). Women, as ever, were signalled out in relation to certain politically authorised forms of social aspiration. As an individual, Thatcher's prominence appeared to 'normalise' female success, at least from the perspective of mainstream media representation, which increasingly showcased ambitious working women, 'power dressing' and conspicuous consumption in lifestyle magazines and imported American soap operas. However, as Heather Nunn argued (2002:105) in her earlier analysis of Thatcherism, throughout the 1980s Thatcher's own speeches and interviews frequently referenced 'the idealized scene of family life' as the home replete with material comforts and the unwaged mother at its harmonious centre. 'What's right for the family is right for Britain' declared Thatcher from the very start of her leadership (*Sunday Express* 29 June 1975:17) and for her the family was both the driving force of the good society and the motor of material aspiration and individual responsibility.

Thatcher rejected utterly the language of class; it was *individuals*, regardless of social background and regardless of earlier social (dis)advantage, who made their own success on their own merits. As pioneering cultural studies critic Stuart Hall (1988) explained in his well-known analysis of the new right, Thatcherism appealed, at different points, to various social identities such as the 'mother', 'working woman', 'tax payer', 'individual', 'proud Britisher', 'entrepreneur', and so on, and these were ideally united across class lines and set against undesirable 'outsiders' such as Marxists, trades unionists and 'trendy teachers'. The ethos here was that those who would thrive best were the self-starters, individuals motivated to improve their own lives. In other words, this was not about equality of outcome or resources but of individual drive and resourcefulness. As Thatcher (1975:16) famously declared, 'Let our children grow tall and some grow taller than others, if they have it in them to do so.'[1] Work hard to earn more to make a better life for one's family on one's own terms; nothing could be simpler or more appealing as a political philosophy for those who were well-equipped or who were determined enough to take it on board or who felt that they deserved a larger slice of the cake.

So the success of the project of economic liberalism which Thatcherism helped to set in motion depended, in part, on the dissemination of certain *values* as well as practices, including those of self-improvement, individual responsibility and personal investment, as exemplified in the practice of home-ownership and the privatisation of national industries. The Conservative imperative to be dependent on no-one but one's self and one's family served as an outright rejection of the earlier failed 'social contract' model of 1970s Labour administrations which had tried to negotiate a 'social wage' with workers in return for universal benefits.

If the home and family were at the heart of individual motivation to self-improvement and material comfort, then property and housing became its lifeblood. The introduction in 1980 of the right for tenants to buy their council houses and flats, and at favourable rates, elaborated on the older Conservative conception of the 'property-owning democracy'. By 1987 1 million dwellings had been moved from public into private ownership (Clarke 1996:383) and by 1990 around 70 per cent of all households had bought or were buying their own property (Savage *et al.* 1992:80). If the financial risks of moving from secure tenancy to owner-occupier status were not always clear, then the rewards were. Many working-class people whose traditional political affiliations, by virtue of historical loyalties and labour-based interests, would have been with the Labour Party embraced opportunities to buy their own home. In the words of Lynsey Hanley (2007:134), who wrote an 'intimate history' of working-class life from the perspective of social housing tenants: 'people decided that they didn't just want freedom *from* [poverty, ignorance, and so on], they wanted freedom *to*. They wanted the freedom to move at will, to paint their doors bright colours .... To improve, I guess.' In other words, the *promise* of Thatcherism, its rhetoric and presentation of the *possibilities* of social change, was as important as its actual policies.

As Stuart Hall (1988:262) explained in his analysis of the re-election of the Conservatives to that second term, the sense that prosperity is the key measurement of individual success and that anyone who opted in could achieve prosperity helped form an 'imaginary community' of people who, even if struggling at the time, might well benefit in future.

The accumulation of money went hand-in-hand with social success as well as with individual and familial security. Memoirist Mandy Nichol recalled the growing imperative for her and many of her family and friends to live 'the good life' and keep up with others and how it proved to be irresistible. She ruefully recalled: 'There I was, I had become a product of Thatcher's Britain. I had the good husband, the house, the 25 year mortgage and all the trappings of what it took to be acceptable and respected' (Nichol 1990:48). Historically, upper-class, and then later middle-class, Britons have always counted on property for investment, to accumulate value or, if sold on, to release capital for reinvestment and to leave as an inheritance (Savage *et al.* 1992:83ff). At the very least, as Hanley and Nichol have indicated, property has always been equated with security, self-respect, autonomy and financial independence. Indeed, the early 'baby boomers', born in the late 1940s and early 1950s and now heading for retirement, have become subject to criticism since the 'credit crunch' specifically for their success in building individual resources via the housing market, concentrating wealth among their own generation and then taking advantage of state pensions and other welfare support (Willetts 2010). Nichol's brief memoir of the Thatcher years highlighted the narrowing intersection between property, credit and social aspiration which apparently made this option more widely available. She recalled, with some regret, that it was not long before the family felt encouraged by low interest rates to borrow for a new car and then to make a move to an even better house – actions which left them working all hours to fix up the house, repay loans and generally fund the life they had elected to lead but which they now had no time to enjoy.

The consequence for those who could not or would not participate in the home-owning democracy was often damaging social disenfranchisement. As Hanley explained, during the 1980s, the council estates where the majority of tenants were renting rather than buying had become ever more neglected and unloved places, housing mainly those who had no escape route out to somewhere more desirable. The residents there became increasingly segregated, becoming 'ciphers for a malingering society' and frequently blamed for the poor conditions in which they lived (Hanley 2007:146). A longer-term by-product, then, of the reorganisation of the City, the sell-off of the better-quality, more desirable

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