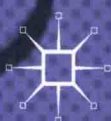


WORKING-CLASS LIFE IN NORTHERN ENGLAND, 1945–2010

THE PRE-HISTORY AND AFTER-LIFE
OF THE INBETWEENER GENERATION

TONY BLACKSHAW



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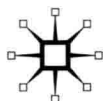
The Pre-History and After-Life of the
Inbetween Generation

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discretion these men and women must remain anonymous and the names used in the study are fictitious, but of suitably 'Inbetweeners' stock. Some small details of their life stories have also been altered so as to retain anonymity. The majority of our respondents were born and/or brought up in south Leeds. Some of them moved there from other parts of the UK as a consequence of the War or to find work. One respondent came to Leeds from abroad directly as a result of the War. The majority of them still live in south Leeds or in the suburbs beyond the south of the city; some of them have died since the interviews took place. I salute every last one of them.

I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of Fred Blackshaw: quite simply the best dad there ever was.

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1

Introduction: Working-Class Life in the Twentieth-Century Interregnum

Between the start of the 1930s and the end of the so-called long sixties (Marwick, 1998), working-class life in England was fundamentally transformed. It changed so rapidly and radically that it is a reasonable interpretation that by the 1970s the *longue durée* of modernity had entered a new conjuncture in which the contradictions underpinning social class inequality revealed during the Industrial Revolution moved decisively away from a specific and distinctive producer 'heavy' and 'solid', 'hardware-focused' shape to take the form of a more uncertain but distinctively consumer 'light' and 'liquid', 'software-focused' one (Bauman, 2000). If solid modernity was one of the rationalization of objects (and human subjects) through standardization, abstraction and mass production, Bauman asserts, the liquid modernity that superseded it was one of rationalization through cultural difference, reflexive individualization and consumerism.

Those early cultural studies interpreters of the twentieth-century Interregnum that divided these two periods, defined here as the time-gap when the world was in a huge state of flux as the old, producer-based 'solid' modernity was dying and a new, consumer-based 'liquid' modernity was still a para-ontology, who had been taught on the one hand to believe that there are human universals which remain constant from age to age and on the other that culture can both ennoble and demean the human condition, knew that they were living in radically changing times, as in Gramsci's (1971: 276) gloomy observation that 'a great variety of morbid symptoms appear', which is perhaps best captured by the term 'consumer revolution'.

In common with Gramsci, these interpreters of culture were pessimistic about capitalism, with its goal of continuous accumulation in the pursuit of profit and the ways in which it was fast infiltrating every area of social and cultural life.

Foremost among these cultural critics were Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), who, in their critique of the Enlightenment, famously argued that working people were becoming increasingly content with what the 'culture industry' manufacturers' had to offer them. This prognosis was in many respects another rendition of Max Weber's (1930) 'disenchanted' world that is characterized by a *deficit of meaning* and an insidious sense of gloom. As is well known, Weber argued that the incessant drive for the accumulation of knowledge and wealth is what underpins modernity. This is because in modern societies rationality and rationalization become all-pervasive, and culture, like all other distinct realms of human activity, is increasingly rationalized – what Weber called the 'iron-cage of rationalization' – for the major needs of modern society are 'cumulative, quantified and quantifiable' (Heller, 1999).

In books such as *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1984), *The Production of Space* (1991) and the three volumes encompassing his *Critiques of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre was subsequently to argue that by the middle of the twentieth century capitalism was well attuned to the business of creating 'imaginary needs' in popular culture. Lefebvre organizes his thesis around three broadly defined and interconnected modernizing trends which begin in the mid-nineteenth century and come into their own by the onset of the 1950s (Gardiner, 2000: 87): first, the gradual disconnection between quotidian and more specialized activities, which results in everyday life entering the consciousness to be claimed as 'personal property'; second, the substitution of use-value for exchange-value; and third, the concomitant fragmentation of organic communities found in working-class neighbourhoods and their replacement by impersonal and contractual relations of a more calculating kind. In this view, working people might have thought they were breaking with the past through the new-found freedoms they had discovered in popular culture, but in fact were, with the best of intentions, merely feeding the proliferation of the universal commercialism of culture that had begun to take shape a century earlier. This was a 'mass' culture that establishes itself as a series of repetitions, which encourages its

adherents to assert themselves by consuming products that are differentiated yet already the same, resulting in human uniformity over individuality (Poovey, 1995).

Locating aspects of the twentieth-century Interregnum in a geographical landscape: Richard Hoggart's South Leeds

On the August Bank Holiday in 1959 Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams met for the first time to discuss changing 'Working Class Attitudes' in a roundtable organized by the *New Left Review*. Two important books recently published by these two men – *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) written by Hoggart and *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958) written by Williams – had quickly become the key reference points for a new generation of scholars concerned with these deprecations of class, community and culture, and not only that, but were also already beginning to establish cultural studies as a new discipline by turning the centre of attention away from concerns with culture as imposed 'from above' to considering culture 'from below', in the process offering the legitimization of a working-class *habitus* to an academic world that had hitherto largely disparaged it.

As befits a scholar taught to study literature in order to empathize with life in all its forms, Hoggart was not one to enter into grandiose theoretical debates about cultural change, preferring to put some local flesh on these instead. As he explained to his counterpart at the beginning of the roundtable, between 1840 and 1890 life in the north of England had been fundamentally transformed by the ever-onward thrust of modernization, more intensive industrialization, accelerating migration from the countryside to cities – such as Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield – leading to increasing urbanization and the growth of districts with street after street of terraced housing, where working families 'began to live in new ways, segregated into districts [which] grew up round the works, near canals, rivers, railway yards' (Hoggart in Hoggart and Williams, 1960: 27). In these new urban milieus, working populations organized themselves quickly into relatively integrated economic, social and cultural units, seamlessly recreating the organic rural culture they had left behind in the countryside in a new industrial form. Moving on from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, Hoggart suggested to

Williams, the pre-industrial world had all but vanished, but in the working-class districts of northern English cities continuity – or at least the intensification of already existing patterns of ‘organic’ rural life (read: community and culture) and social order (read: ascribed social stratification and patriarchal gender relations) into their urban equivalents – was the rule. The sense of this world, as it is understood by Hoggart, is concerned neither with the shift from rural to urban nor with whether mutual dependency is translated into class solidarity, but, rather, with the continuation of a particular way of life.

In *The Uses of Literacy* Hoggart devotes much scholarly energy to what happens once this organic working-class culture, whose ‘public values and private practices are tightly intertwined’, and which bears all the hallmarks of a folk society that is free of the spoils of manufacture, starts to give way to a new mass popular culture, which displays all the ‘shiny barbarism’ of a ‘candy floss world’ (Hoggart, 1992); when an era had come to an end, the era when – at the risk of being tautologous – world and being-in-the-world were of two kinds; the moment when a way of life was altered and diminished permanently.

There are certain history books which carry with them a special and spiritual power; they are works that seem to have what Thomas Mann said of *The Magic Mountain*: their ‘own will and purpose’, and perhaps ‘a far more authoritative one’ than their author had in mind. These books are full of a primal sense of everyday life as it was lived just then, at that moment in time, and the atmosphere of the world depicted in the rhythms of their prose achieves a palpable depth of authenticity. If these books have an inevitable tone of nostalgia, they are nonetheless able to summon up the ghosts from the depths where they have been held, much against their will, by less gifted chroniclers of the past, and now demand to be heard. Although it is not a history book as such, the ability to depict the vast, unfolding historical process – which, as the New Historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt (2009) points out, is ‘most fully realized in small, contingent, local gestures’ – shines and sings throughout the pages of *The Uses of Literacy*.

This book opens up a working-class world in northern England that has hitherto been closed and visible only to those who have lived it. It is a study that could only emanate out of deep empathy, of

its author living with feeling for others, dealing with the everyday world of human life as it presents itself *zunächst und zumeist*, or ‘most closely and mostly’, to use an expression from Heidegger. This is the quality that gives this book its warmth. After reading it, you will never see the fast-fading working-class world of early twentieth-century northern England in quite the same way. Indeed, no other study has to date immersed its readers so passionately in a monochrome depiction of this time and place in its hitherto neglected, working-class corners.

One of the things that Hoggart is after in this book – and, in my view, delivers – is an unmitigated depiction of a certain culture, a certain class of people, a certain place (south Leeds) and a certain time in history. His account fits snugly into the interstices of these aspects it explores. It is a story of a collective existence that is much more than mere historical reportage: it is a reliving of a way of life in the most expressive prose. What Hoggart attempts to do in this book is compel his readers to share the authenticity of this world, in which reality and its interpretation are one and the same. You can taste it, feel it, smell it, and stand in the shoes of its inhabitants. It is with the utmost empathy that Hoggart affectionately describes in sepia terms a milieu where the

houses are fitted into the dark and lowering canyons between the giant factories and the services which attend them; ‘the barracks of an industry’... The viaducts interweave with the railway lines and the canals below; the gas-works fit into a space somewhere between them all, and the pubs and graceless Methodist chapels stick up at intervals throughout... Rough sooty grass pushes through the cobbles; dock and nettle insist on a defiant life in the rough and trampled earth-heaps at the corners of the waste-pieces, undeterred by ‘dog-muck’, cigarette packets, old ashes; rank elder, dirty privet, and rosebay willow-herb take hold in some of the ‘backs’ or in the walled-off space behind Corporation Baths. All day and all night the noises and smells of the district – factory hooters, trains shunting, the stink of the gas-works – remind you that life is a matter of shifts and clocking-in-and-out. The children look improperly fed, inappropriately clothed, and as though they could do with more sunlight and green fields. (Hoggart, 1992: 59)

This book is not an ethnography, but Hoggart's eye is the ethnographer's; everything in it is rendered from the world view and idiom of the locals. Here Hoggart captures well the romantic sense of place as a living organism. As Alan Bennett has said, few people have written about Leeds. Certainly nobody has ever written about the city like Hoggart, who draws layer after layer of meaning from the simplest acts and events to depict them with such scrupulous precision of what it feels like to inhabit a milieu where one learns 'early on the quite useful lesson that life is generally something that happens elsewhere' (Bennett, 2000: 36).

The Uses of Literacy is a book of two parts: the first, 'An "Older" Order', a study of a parochial, working-class social milieu; the second, 'Yielding Place to New', a damning critique of the accelerating stage-show of popular cultural change. The difference in style and focus between the two halves of the book also intensifies the contrast between rich lives that had been and the regrettable reality of a burgeoning consumer existence. The first part of the book opens a world that has hitherto been closed and visible only to those who have lived it, and what it offers us is a historical tapestry of a noble working class, embedding it in a series of well-conceived period tableaux and vignettes. The immense accomplishment of this part of the book is to make that world and its culture so fully perceptible. With his gift for pointed observation and shaping pitch-perfect images with words, Hoggart delights in evoking the everyday character of south Leeds life, whose solidity is everywhere: in its idioms: 'E's got a right chest on 'im' and: 'Sh/'E 'as a lovely 'ead of 'air' (Hoggart, 1988: 58); in its food: 'something solid, preferably meaty, with a well-defined flavour' (Hoggart, 1992: 37); in its names: Ethel, Ida, Edna and Hilda and Walter, Fred, Harold and Bert and the like – which, as Alan Bennett (2000: 31) observes, are not names you can easily dissolve, because they are carved into every cell of their owners' bodies – its traditions; its culture and routines; its families; its work and leisure lives; its implicit class structure and the indifference to escaping it ... in the process painting us a picture of a quotidian industrial milieu that seems to remain intact, even 'though much works against it, and partly because so much works against it' (Hoggart, 1992: 33).

Here Hoggart is not claiming to have made any empirical discoveries or to have revealed any conceptual necessities. As Richard Rorty

(2007) would say, Hoggart is merely articulating his own cultural-political stance by showing us how to feel a world in flux; Hoggart World and its people are full of juice, and they are portrayed with total affection. This is what renders this compelling account of a working-class world real, giving it a tangible quality, an essence that his readers can trust is true – even if it is, as the eminent philosopher R. G. Collingwood once observed, really a ‘history of the mind’, always posing its own questions about the so-called facts. Indeed, Hoggart’s account is simply the sparkling statement of a valuable point of view; it is, to borrow a turn of phrase from Lionel Trilling, about sincerity and authenticity. It is this, rather than its empirical truths or its theoretical inventions, that gives *The Uses of Literacy* its authority. And it achieves its sincerity and authenticity not only by recovering remarkable, intimate details of the small events of everyday life in beautifully observed detail, but also by making a major and lasting contribution to our understanding of the unfolding historical process. The truth is, though, that Hoggart is interpreting a world already disappearing into social histories, and what he presents us with is an extraordinary sense of intimacy with a vanishing way of life.

In the second part of the book, Hoggart is a man at loggerheads with the increasingly crass commercialization of society. He isolates and castigates a trend which he saw as inimical to the full rich life: the descent of culture into tastelessness and falsehood. This was the tendency – one that had already been identified by T. S. Eliot (1949) in his *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* and in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, and other members of the Frankfurt School – of the standards of culture (already eroded by mass culture) to plummet to ever more new depths. Yet Hoggart is unusual among scholars of his generation in also focusing his attention on the social conditions of working-class life, which had fostered values of long-term substance, but were also now increasingly coming under the pressure of mass culture, which, Fredric Jameson would later argue, must be understood ‘not as empty distraction or “mere” false consciousness, but rather as a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be “managed” or repressed’ (1979: 141).

True to the critical prophecies of the early cultural critics, in the northern, working-class culture in cities such as Leeds in the 1950s,

the hitherto univocal order of things is all but gone and people are no longer content to fit into their assigned roles; especially significant is the new cult of youth embodied in ‘the Juke-Box Boy’, the ‘hedonistic but passive barbarian’ who is a ‘portent’ of things to come (Hoggart, 1992: 250). To borrow an observation from what Paul Tillich said about the Christian Fall (Irwin, 1991), Hoggart World is transforming, signifying a passage from connections of communal *essence* based on working-class solidness to the connections of commodified *existence* made to the measure of an amorphous world incorporating ‘the new great classless class’ of mass-produced individuals. Firmly entrenched in Hoggart’s analysis is the idea that this ‘Fall’ – what Graeme Turner (1990: 48) aptly describes as the ‘cultural Fall’ that ‘seems to have taken place during the 1930s rather than the nineteenth century’ – is an event both precipitous and of tragic proportions.

New fates wash up with every generational tide, and the appearance of the generation represented by ‘the new great classless class’ is one that signals the end of an essentially noble working-class way of life. According to Hoggart, its ‘cultural Fall’ marks a turning point in the history of working-class culture. It cut off one generation from another, providing a shibboleth for admission into a world of cultural homogenization. Existing outside time, divorced from the past, denied the conditions through which communal bonds can be obtained, working-class men and women had begun to live life in an absolute present. As Deleuze was to say a few years later, from now on the question of the history would be substituted with the question of the ‘new’ (Marrati, 2008). It wasn’t just socio-economic relations that had given the ‘working class’ its structure, but also its culture; and, with the substitution of the ‘new’ for the ‘old’, all that remains by the mid-1950s, notwithstanding the obdurateness of the ‘earnest minority’, its rituals and the physical landmarks – the tours around family and friends on Whitsunday, the pub sing-alongs, the charabanc trips to the seaside and all the rest – is the ghostly presence of a once full, rich life.

When you reach the end of the book, it dawns on you that what Hoggart is really providing his readers with in the first part of the book is merely a historical representation of a once upon a time thoroughly decent way of life. The real subject matter of his critique is the undignified new generation throwing itself into the crass new

consumer society, seemingly intent on embracing an altogether different kind of death-in-life zombie existence 'outside the limited range of a few immediate appetites. Souls which may have had little opportunity to open will be kept hard-gripped, turned in upon themselves, looking out "with odd dark eyes like windows" upon a world which is largely phantasmagoria of passing shows and vicarious stimulations' (Hoggart, 1992: 246).

The limits of Hoggart

On its publication Hoggart's book was immediately and immensely influential. But its putative insights were very quickly overtaken by new theoretical developments emerging in sociology and cultural studies, which have led to his work being roundly criticized for offering what is an ostensibly one-sided, uncritical and nostalgic perception of working-class culture (see the summary in Turner, 1990) – the consensus seems to be that Hoggart ventured to reveal the world of an 'authentic' working class, but closed his ears and eyes to ways of life that spoke to him in unexpected tones and shades – that his work, with its Leavisite literary heartbeat, lacks a guiding theoretical perspective. However, such criticisms ignored the fact that *The Uses of Literacy* is really an ideal-typical portrait of a vanishing working-class culture to which the academic and establishment worlds at the time of its publication had no direct access. The first part of the book depicts a fading world that its author *really* does understand, and this is why this most tender localized study became the key reference point for a whole generation of scholars concerned with class, community, family, friendships, leisure and everyday life.

This last observation notwithstanding, the milieu depicted in *The Uses of Literacy* is made to the measure of, and limited by, the cognitive frame peculiar to the world preceding the Interregnum described in the first few paragraphs of this book: one attuned to everyday worlds dominated by uniformity. This shouldn't surprise us, though, since, to draw on some observations from Roger Scruton (2009), Hoggart was of that generation of scholars who were taught under the auspices of a cognitive frame that assumed that you should study literature in order to sympathize with life – even if that did not mean sympathizing with human culture in all its forms. He was also taught that it is not political judgement that is relevant to understanding

life, but its expressiveness, profundity and relationship to truth; that how you justify the study of life is how you would justify the study of literature: as a type of training which invites judgement of taste but leaves politics behind. The central discipline for Hoggart's generation was the humanities, and specifically (as the title of his book suggests) literary criticism; and scholars were taught criticism by getting them to raise questions about their own and other people's emotions. Moreover, and as I have intimated already, they were also taught that their authority to judge was legitimized by their superior (objective) knowledge. In other words, and as Bauman would say, the cultural criticism underpinning Hoggart's analysis is determined by the authority of legislators, whose opinions, 'having been selected, become correct and binding' thanks to 'procedural rules which assure the attainment of truth, the arrival of moral judgement, and the selection of proper artistic taste. Such procedural rules have a universal validity, as to the products of their application' (1987: 4).

The trouble is that the (legislating) cognitive frame that underpins Hoggart's analysis cannot make any sense of the post-Fall world that is 'yielding place to the new'. The order of things has shifted and understanding is at an end. The problem lies, not with the phenomenon of change, which Hoggart clearly sees, but with the way in which he understands it. The strange movement of time has severed the ontological unity of the cognitive frame for scholars of his generation's understanding of the world, where everything was connected to everything else, and the entire configuration of connections formed both the atmosphere of the world and its order of things. In other words, the umbilical cord with the world before the 'cultural Fall' has been cut and intellectual understanding has become ontologically displaced. While the first part of *The Uses of Literacy* describes keenly and accurately time and place, its smells, colours and the people who shape it, and in a way that recognizes the need to put all these things down clearly and exactly so that they will be remembered, the second part of the book, in a curious mangling of contempt, describes unsatisfactorily a world that is being bent out of shape by mass popular culture. What this suggests is the issue of generational distance, an arroyo of collective identity and subjectivity shaped by the historical dimension of the social process separating scholars of Hoggart's generation from the cognitive world of the 'hedonistic but passive barbarians'.

Those scholars from the next generation of cultural studies, who had been educated under the strange movement of change identified in Hoggart's book, tended to practise criticism in a less ambitious and more dispassionate way by, on the one hand, raising questions about universal truth claims and, on the other, recognizing that culture might invite judgement of taste but that this is always political. The upshot of this was that this new generation of cultural studies scholars were consequently more theoretical than scholars of Hoggart's generation, elevating reading and interpretation; more attuned to difference than sameness, decentering the author; and more interested in comprehending the present than the past, for which they would eventually invent several new terms, notably 'postmodernity', 'late capitalism' and 'reflexive modernization' (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Accordingly, cultural studies never got round to reinterpreting the Interregnum, preferring instead to focus attention on its after-life. Cultural studies thus still awaits a revisionist assessment of the Interregnum, which was followed by a new period in modern history, remarkable for fast-forward moments when everything becomes changed in absolute terms.

Histories of the twentieth-century Interregnum post-Hoggart

In marked contrast, in historical studies much scholarly attention has been devoted to the task of interpreting this period. The reason for these books is not far to seek. With the twenty-first century in full swing, it is generally perceived that there is now a sufficient gap in time to make the history of this recent period of English society feasible. To date there have been two distinct approaches to this task of retrieval.

Kynaston's 'Tales of the New Jerusalem'

There is the orthodox, synoptic, populist or 'heritage history' approach, which tends to generalize about the British rather than the English experience and is reluctant to theorize about the contexts, causes and consequences that lead to historical change – it prefers to find them instead. Arguably, the best-known exponent of this approach is David Kynaston, whose emergent 'Tales of the New