

## **CHAVS: The Demonization of the Working Class**

**OWEN JONES: Verso, London 2011**

Romany word for child – ‘the burgeoning peasant underclass’.

Aneurin Bevan founded Council housing as mixed communities.

1970s 2 in five thus. 2011 1 in ten. Council housing reserved for poorest.

Result: two thirds in social housing from poorest two-fifths of population.

1979: over 7 million worked in manufacturing.

2009: less than half – 2.83 million. Now low-paid public and service sector.

27% believe that poverty is caused by lack of will-power. Makes inequality palatable.

1959: Macmillan said: ‘The class war is over and we have won it.’

1970s: Unions flexed their muscles. 1974 Labour Party won election and said that they would rebalance society in favour of working class. Winter of discontent because incomes were low.

1979: Thatcher elected. Keith Joseph talks of limiting w/c families. Tories, like Pinochet, were determined to erase concept of working class because:

Concept of Class:

1. Implies that one group has power and the other has not.
2. Something of the above needs rectifying.
3. If one group live by working for others, there is exploitation.
4. The concept makes you define your interest over against others.
5. Implies a potentially organised bloc with political and economic power.

Thatcher therefore: (see Ridley secret policy document on miners, leaked 1979)

- 1. Disempowered Trades Unions.** Steel-workers, Stockport Messenger, Miners. 1970s half of all workers – about quarter now, with service-sector largely union-free zone. Harsh anti-union laws. No voice or collective identity. Improvement now is individual expectation – the poor deserve their lot. Crushing sense of powerlessness generally.

- 2. Shifting tax burden ~ Trickle-up.** top one percent owns 23% UK wealth whilst bottom 50% own 6% (much of this 6% being borrowed mortgages etc) Tax evasion £70billion a year. Inequality is now celebrated.
- 3. Stripping Business of regulation.** As productivity has increased so wages decreased. Longbridge was once largest industrial complex in world. Globalisation offers ease of capital movement. To maintain spending, they borrowed readily available credit to purchase goods to keep system going – but more than their pay-packets. Irregular hours means pressure on families. Atomisation of society. 2009 TUC estimates that 7hrs unpaid overtime for 5milln workers – that's £27.4 billion to business. Bristol Uni (Centre for Market and Public Organisation) looked at Civil Servants whose unpaid overtime equated to £9billion. Left UK dependent on profits of the City.
- 4. Denying the working class their base and pride – productive industry.** Unemployment emasculates workers. Skills were lost and not paid according to social value. Service industry cannot replicated sense of belonging, community and personal worth. In five years she stripped out a third of manufacturing. No other West Europe country had this policy. (policy repeats – 1980s, early 1990s, 2008 recession) 1979 had 7mill in factories, now 2.4m. Bankers created 2008 but workers paid price with twice as many jobs lost in their sector than finance industries. Demonization of the class whilst at same time saying it no longer existed.
- 5. Denying the working class their community stability – council housing.** 1979 Housing Bill. 20yr tenants buy at half market price with 100% mortgage. Divided working-class. Aspiration was now for ownership not community – (Woman's Own: 'no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families') In 1979 average CH rent was £6.20, 1987 £25. Council housing now only for deprived and vulnerable.
- 6. Political Withdrawal.** Labour abandoned its role as voice and protector and moved to identity politics (gays, ethnicities, women) and international politics (Palestine, Iraq)

Led to family breakdown, drug addiction amongst the working class,

'Trickle-down': Lack of aspiration, idolisation of rich, so poverty is fault of poor. Now Iain Duncan Smith: CSJ Centre for Social Justice: argues that poverty is about family break-down, ill-discipline, substance-abuse, not lack of money. Move them from estates where they are trapped where there is no work. Change poor individuals' behaviour.

1979: 5 million in poverty; 1992: 14 million in poverty.

### **NEW LABOUR:**

With professionalization of politicians, few if any Labour MPs know what normal life of working-class is. They are in top 4% of socio-economic statistics.

Old Labour had been class-conscious but racist and sexist. New Labour have exorcised 'class' from language.

1949 poll: 43% described selves as working class, now more than half. See Andrew Adonis & Stephen Pollard: *A Class Act: The Myth of Britain's Classless Society*. 1998.p9

1990s revised national statistics through 'Social Class based on Occupation' but was re-named 'National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification.' Poverty references replaced by 'Social Exclusion' – implied a group of people cut off from society as an 'underclass', 'excluded from mainstream)

'class' is something which is given to me, 'exclusion' happens to me – and I am somehow an agent in that process.

New Labour therefore offered *escape* from the working class. When John Prescott complained he was ridiculed on base of his class-stereotype. Employment was their answer even though many in poverty were in low-paid work.

NL argued for a 'meritocracy', where things were rigged for middle-class who therefore 'deserve' to be at top.

2008: Housing Minister Caroline Flint suggested that 'work-shy' might lose their CH home; new tenants signing commitment contracts, ie Council tenants are free-loaders.

ASBOs: Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. Four in ten are to mentally ill youngsters.

Hillsborough denigrated poor, police never questioned. During NL sports & social clubs decrease by 55%, post offices by 39%, swimming pools 21%, pubs by 7%, public libraries 6%, Betting Shops up 39%, Casinos up 27% .

### **Multiculturalism used as blind to class**

Inequality became exclusively understood through prism of race and ethnic identity. So in 2009 NL launched £12million campaign to assist white working class who seemed to have been marginalised by this shift – but that was to further imply that white workers were separate from black workers. Pitted black vs white further.

BNP fifth biggest party in UK. 1999 only just over 100K Europe Assembly votes. English history of feeling superior over other races. 2009 it had risen to nearly a million. Despite UK having highest proportion of mixed race marriages in Europe.

Politicians refuse to address working class problems esp jobs and housing. Particularly where there is a fear rather than reality of influx. 'Nothing of worth in Working Class culture' – does not even exist! But Politicians use ethnicity as the divider of society.

British-born working age population increased from 1979 by only 348K. Non-UK-born equivalents by 2.4million! They work hard because: 1. See it as temporary, 2. Can learn English on the job, 3. Good wages compared with home.

Working class more ethnically diverse than rest of population yet 9/10 UK is white.

### **Ridiculed Working Class.**

1960: *Coronation Street* on ITV, sympathetic and realistic. *Saturday Night & Sunday Morning*, *A Taste of Honey*, *Room at the Top*, *Cathy Come Home*.

1970s *The Rag Trade*: women's union winning against malicious bosses. Even into 1980s likeable working-class characters in *Only Fools and Horses*, *Auf Wedersehen Pet*.

Thatcher period brought Harry Enfield nasty and grasping characters: Wayne, Waynetta Slob. 2003: Website 'ChavScum': Old hard-working working class is no more and rump left with no moral compass. Press likewise demonise Jade Goody as 'the pig' until she dies of cancer when she becomes the angel. *Shameless* and *The Royall Family* fail to show why they are in this situation. TV simultaneously promotes rich and powerful. Even pop bands more middle-class. Football likewise is priced out and into hands of middle class with the price hike blamed on hooligans as cost of new grounds increased, and the heroes move immediately into Middle class enclaves.

Chav hate justifies preservation of a pecking order.

### **DEFINITION?**

Being working class means being poor, Middle class means being educated. No longer those men who left home at same time and worked & socialised together, on low income and never owning own house. So what is it?

*"People who have no means of sustenance other than the sale of labour, and they do not control their labour. Work for others and cannot control own labour."*

Retail is second biggest employer with 3million people – one in ten workers – a threefold increase since 1980. It's becoming automated like factories with autocratic management and verbal abuse from customers – half on less than £7 an hour.

Call centres are similar – hands up to go to toilet, high sickness rates. Temporary agency work is now 1.5 million with few rights. Service work pays less than manufacturing with disappearance of skilled working class.

Hairdressers (170K), data input, security, receptionists, care assistants, cleaners.  
Talk is now of an 'hour-glass' society with a squeezed middle but large wealthy and large poor population at each end.

### **Aspiration:**

You can only aspire if you know about it and anyway what's the use of aspiration if the goal is illusory? (eg Quality apprenticeships) Underemployed intelligentsia.

If you make it you end up with 'imposter syndrome' cos the public-schooled middle classes have education which claims rights.

Unemployment: In May 2009, Professionals 1.3%; Skilled 8.1%; customer service 10.5%; unskilled 13.7% (Stewart Lanslay 2009)

Job-seekers' allowance in 2010 is £65.45 per week. Should we be surprised if claimants top up with work on the side?

### **Poverty**

Less than 60% median income after housing costs are deducted. In 1979 there were less than 5m, 2010 13.5m (one in ten of population) Single person after housing equals £115pw, couple with two children £279 per week. Joseph Rowntree say single needs £14K to live acceptably. Tax credits support poverty wages.

### **Housing Estates**

Before 1979 never fewer than 75K CHs per year built. 1999 it was 84! Instead the govt spends £21million per year on housing benefit to subsidize private landlords.

Labour Party did not trust Las so ALMOs, stock transfers, HAssociations. Cameron calls for termed contracts and threatens to limit housing benefit so that poor have to vacate city centres – social cleansing.

### **Gangs**

Coping mechanism. Career advancement through ranks, can be 'success' in crime and excitement.

### **Crime**

Tony Blaire: Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime.

### **Single Parenthood**

84% want to study or get a job. Only one in fifty single mums are under eighteen. Over half had while married and average age is 36. Regions where teenage pregnancy

is rife are where industrial base was destroyed. Motherhood is one way to gain self respect and adult status.

### **Argues for a NEW POLITICS OF CLASS**

Not just lifting individuals up the ladder. Acknowledging the radical change in the working class. Straddling international divisions. Build green CHouses. Job security and pride – co-operatives? People of all colour are poor! Look to causes of anti-social behaviour. Chase financial crimes of the rich. Trades Unions to reclaim their voice and power for the class.