

# The Idea of Class(ification)

BA Central Issues, Lancaster. 2017

# Likely Confusions: Be Alert to

1. Sociological analysis eg Marx, Weber, Bourdieu
2. Sociological measurement eg RG, NS-SEC, stratification studies
3. Sociological studies of how class relations are lived
4. Popular cultural usage eg media
5. Historical analysis of class formations

And note all of these different explanations often have moral Dimensions e.g. the use of the term “underclass”

This is why it is always easier to pay attention to classification. Class is the end product of a process of classification.

# History

- The idea of class is classed! Contested history
- The idea of class comes from the history of classification
- Why do people need to be classified?
- 1600's "Theory of Monstrosity" (Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor) to justify throwing people off their land (privatisation - the Enclosure Acts) they had to be made into monsters who were designated as "undeserving" (a very long legacy).
- Classification then develops in different ways;
- Note a key difference between those who claim to be "a class" and those who are positioned by classification

# History continued...

- For the middle class through claims for taste and authority,
- For labourers – male positioned as outcasts, dangerous,
- Labour (domestic servants) often depicted through racialized iconography of degradation ‘contagion, promiscuity, savagery’
- For women – controlled by nature, but some positioned as also dangerous,
- Through legitimating colonialism as monstrous, outcasts, dangerous, nature
- Sometimes mixed eg “savages” or in the 1800’s “the degenerate classes” – all categories merged
- Important: people do not always accept the classification (or they learn to use it)

## 2 Major Traditions in the Study of Class

The significant difference between the two main perspectives is cause and effect: one attempts to explain why classes come into effect and the consequences, whilst the other measures the end product of historical social relations.

### **Political arithmetic - stratification**

- Developed by William Petty (1665) for the purpose of calculating the population of England in order to tax them! For the government
- Classes can be broken down into many types in order to be measured
- There is no dynamism in class relations as class is just used for the purposes of measuring difference.
- People are just elements in a calculation (consciousness is not an issue)
- Class is represented as a hierarchy (stratification of types)

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### **Marxist (1844)**

- Developed by a political critic of the conditions of economic exploitation
- Class is always formed in a relationship between 2 classes
- That relationship is always exploitative: labour v capital
- Therefore this relationship is antagonistic
- People will come to recognise their exploitative conditions and thereby recognise themselves as a class (class consciousness)
- Class is represented as a struggle between 2 opposing interests
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# How Class is Known and Lived Through Culture, not just Economic Relations (Marx) or Measurement (PA)

Weber introduces the idea of:

- *Status* whereby class is known and measured on the basis of non-economic qualities such as prestige and honour.
- Status fits within a class hierarchy analysis of stratification
- Stratification is different although often included within class analysis: it assumes a hierarchy rather than a relationship)
- Religion is shown to be critical to status and legitimating inequality eg the significance of religion to legitimating class interests. See Max Weber's "*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*" on how protestant values of work (labouring for God) legitimated the interests of capitalists and kept the labourers labouring.

# Religion also Draws our Attention to Morality in the Making of Class Relations

- Morality becomes increasingly significant to the development of both traditions.
- For the Marxist tradition – inequality, exploitation and alienation are immoral.
- Status becomes an element in the evaluation of jobs within a PA hierarchy (e.g. management jobs vs labouring).
- Morality always central to struggles for class(ification) – also race, gender legitimization)



# E.P. Thompson “The Making of the Working Class” (1966) Interests and a Relationship

- A very different history
- Rather than having the term “class” imposed upon them as a description of degradation, Thompson argues that the working class learnt to describe their experience as a collective one by using the term “class”. It united them in the struggle against exploitation.
- He shows how the working class ‘made themselves’ in response to their degraded conditions by fighting for a better life against the middle class.
- Thompson notes how ‘interests’ are significant in connecting people together, but he notes how these interests emerge as a result of the relationship between the working and the middle class.
- Class is always a relationship. It is this relationship that is crucial. You cannot have one without the other.
- Class for Thompson is a relationship, shaped through different interests, not a thing that can be identified and measured (a different Marxist perspective).
- Thompson talks of “moral economies”, whereby people created their own values from their own culture rather than having ideas about which culture has value imposed upon them.

# Different English Histories of Class Formation: The Middle Class

- Struggles by the merchant class to challenge the power of the landed aristocracy
- In England the 1832 Reform Act is often seen to be a critical moment when the middle class campaigned as a group to gain political representation (just like the Suffragette movement) in order to protect and enhance their property and trade interests
- In this struggle morality and taste become key ways for expressing the value of one class against another
- Religion is also used to authorise claims to a superior morality
- Aristocratic women came in for a huge amount of symbolic abuse because they were seen to be sexually excessive and visually excessive (theatre and art became key sites for struggle)



# Pierre Bourdieu: Mixing Marx and Weber with Space

- Bourdieu explains class through
- the volume and composition of 4 major types of capital: we inherit these
- Different types of capital through an accident of birth. This shapes our access to capitals

**Economic capital:** wealth, income, financial inheritance.

**Cultural capital:** individual disposition, education.

**Social capital:** connections, social network.

**Symbolic capital:** social legitimation of any form of capital.

The middle class have high volume of all types, but can sustain some losses depending on the “fields” in which people “exchange their capitals (so precarious gig economy work can be sustained for longer by those with other forms of capital)  
EG’s

- These 4 types gain their value in the fields of social space in which they operate eg in the university economic, cultural, symbolic and social – all capital types - align with the culture of the “field”, thereby giving the middle class a huge advantage.

# Gendered Classification: Freedom, Rescue and Institutionalisation of MC Symbolic Capital

- Significance of religion - Evangelical Christianity- to “domestic ideology” that was promoted as a form of superior civilisation: ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’ (see Catherine Hall, Carole Dyhouse, History Workshop Journal)
- “Domestic ideology’ promoted the cultural capital - standards of the wealthy - was a middle class ideal – the working class woman always had to work.
- MC women rebelled against the restriction of the home eg Octavia Hill or fictional Mrs. Fox (in the BBC’s *The Crimson Petal, novel by Michael Faber*) able to gain ‘freedom’ by entering public space on mission to ‘rescue’ ‘dirty’ working class women eg Sugar)
- “Cleanliness was next to Godliness” promoted in areas with no sewerage.



# Gendered Classification: Freedom, Rescue and Institutionalisation of MC Symbolic Capital continued...

- Imposition of MC economic standards key to gendered class differences.
- Class has a moral gendered raced sexed history – MC femininity is based on standards of purity that cannot be accessed or achieved by many women,
- This enable middle class women to claim superior domestic standards.
- Octavia Hill used these standards to develop what we now know as “social work” (= institutionalisation)
- generated through constitutive exclusion (always has to be limit- that which it is not).
- This is evidence of a class relationship - one class is positioned as inadequate by another. One class gains “freedom” at the expense of another.

# Working Class Women Repeatedly Blamed and Allocated Responsibility for National Crisis

- Crisis always useful for consolidating power
- Sonya Rose – historical repetitions
- Anna Davin – Boer War. Women blamed for inadequate supply of infantry to fight. Government developed domestic education “schools for mothers”, then domestic education, for healthy war fodder!
- War: I and II women blamed again for the weakening of soldiers through venereal disease. Government introduces VD clinics that regulate and criminalize women. Not men.

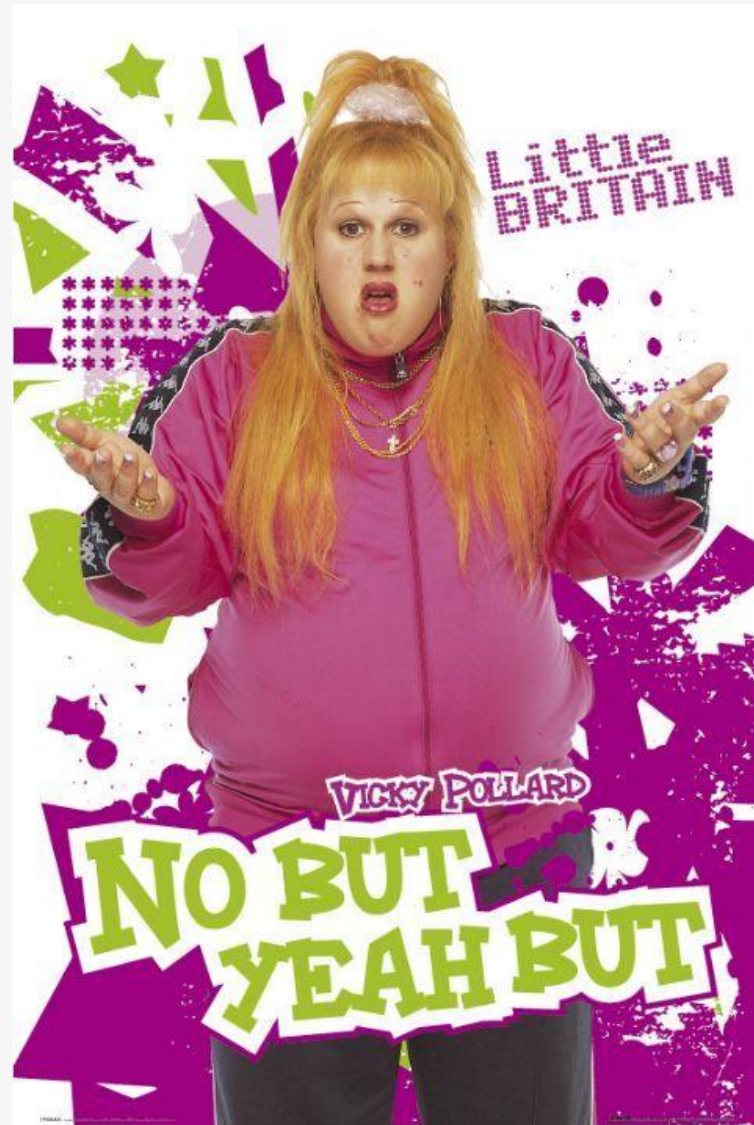
# Working Class Women Repeatedly Blamed and Allocated Responsibility for National Crisis continued...

- Miriam David – early 1900s concerns over drunken unruly men. Government education legislation introduced to make women responsible for deviant men and boys (note legacy: mothers responsible and imprisoned in 2011 children who rioted)
- 1970s fears of miscegenation – Government and media express concerns over diluting the purity of the nation
- 1980s Government and media targeting of single mothers begins with a vengeance: “diluting quality of the nation”, generating “unruly” boys.
- 2000’s Government and media identify the wrong sort of “breeding”. Cuts to welfare support for children to stop the “wrong types” reproducing .



# Alternative Comedy? Vicky Pollard from *Little Britain* (Matt Lucas and David Walliams) BBC3 2003

Note legacies of miscegenation and breeding concerns repeated





# Significance of Perspective

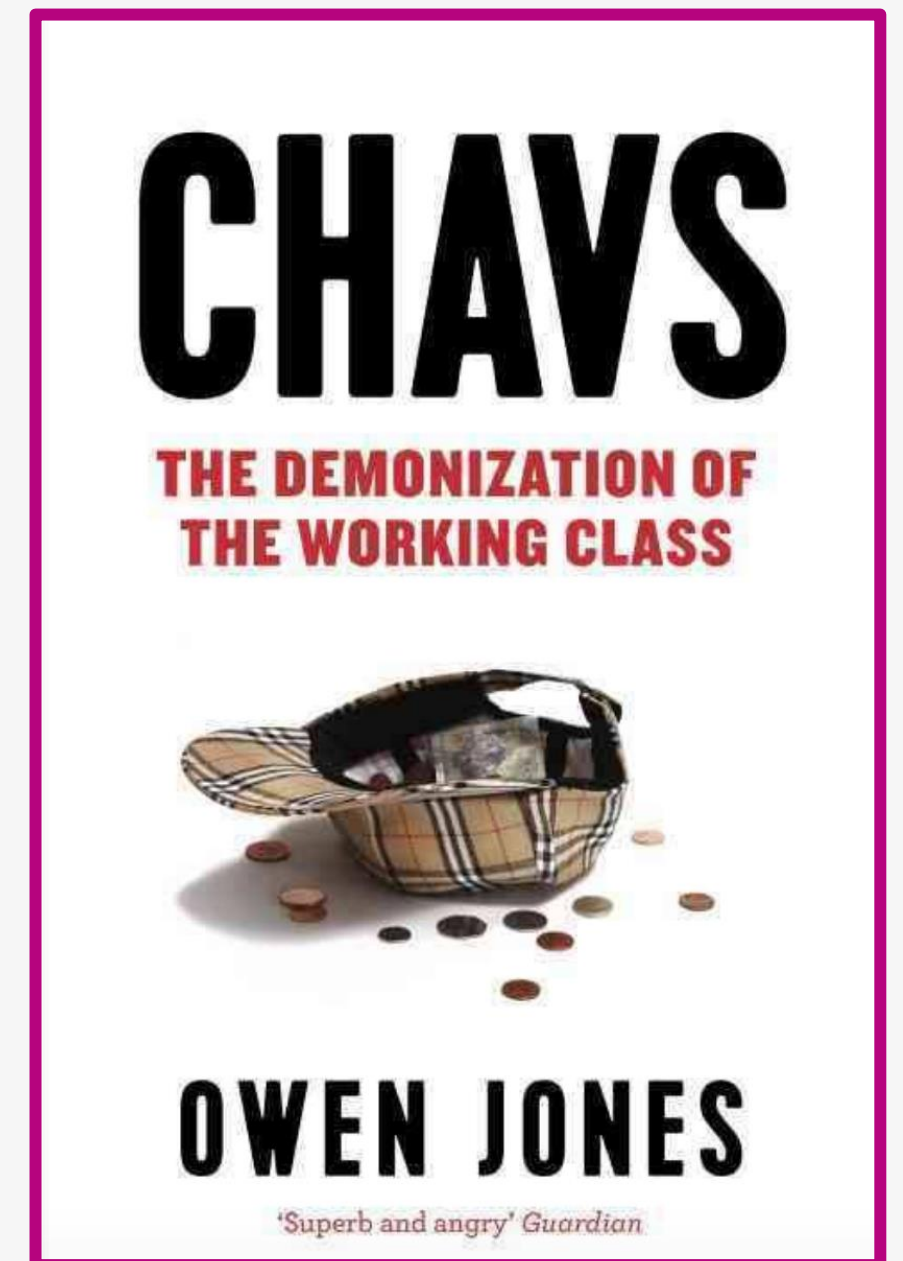
- Speaking the word “class” brings different perspectives into view: eg if we think of the world as an antagonistic relation or a measured hierarchy.
- Analysis of class is different to how class is lived (abstract v concrete)
- Popular use is usually different to analysis (and this is where people get very confused!)
- Popular use is usually about power and political interests:
- It could make the privileged aware of their privilege and thus feel embarrassed (eg Andrew Sayer’s work)
- Or it could make people feel as if they are being undervalued and mis-recognised (eg my research)
- Who is speaking, where, the perspective they take and the value they attach to the category is central to understanding (government, media and some academics speak from their MC perspective).
- For the last 35 years politicians and some sociologists have attempted to deny the significance of class. They are trying to stop people drawing attention to inequality.

## E.g. Classifying the Classifier (Symbolic Violence)

- Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [1979]), a French sociologist of class, notes in relation to attempts to assert one's distinction 'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (p. 6).
- If you use classed terms eg "chav" it means you are trying to draw attention to your own position (usually as superior) in relation to the person you are naming.
- See Steph Lawler on "middle-class" disgust
- Why are the MC so concerned to detail the "lack" of others?
- Remember the difference between those who "claim to be" a class, and those who are positioned by others.
- Bertell Ollman argues the Marxist use of class is best understood by "who is the enemy, why are they the enemy"

# What Does the Term Class Do?

- What does it enable us to see?
- What does it enable us to occlude?
- Why do some people want to use it and others not?
- The idea of class (and the process of classification) is always tied to struggles for power and interests
- It is often played out through the display and claims for “taste”



# The PA Tradition Continues:

- The *Registrar-General's Social Classes* were introduced in 1913 and were based on head of household occupation.
- They were renamed in 1990 as *Social Class based on Occupation* and apply to the whole population.
- The classes are described as follows:
- NS- SEC (Office for National Statistics socio-economic classifications)

I	Professional occupations
II	Managerial and technical occupations
IIIN	Skilled non-manual occupations
IIIM	Skilled manual occupations
IV	Partly-skilled occupations
V	Unskilled occupations

# The Great British Class Survey

## **Remember the 2 traditions:**

- Marxist (relationship of exploitation/antagonism)
- Political Arithmetic- counting people for categorisation purposes – stratification
- Then remember: Weber on status and Bourdieu on space.
- The GBCS represents the PA tradition (7 class divisions) together with Weber and Bourdieu. They measure different capitals as they concentrate in spatial zones.
- Major flaw is that they asked people to declare their own class through a variety of cultural measures of taste (eg how often they visited museums, ate out at restaurants, which music they listened to).
- Nearly all their respondents were middle class

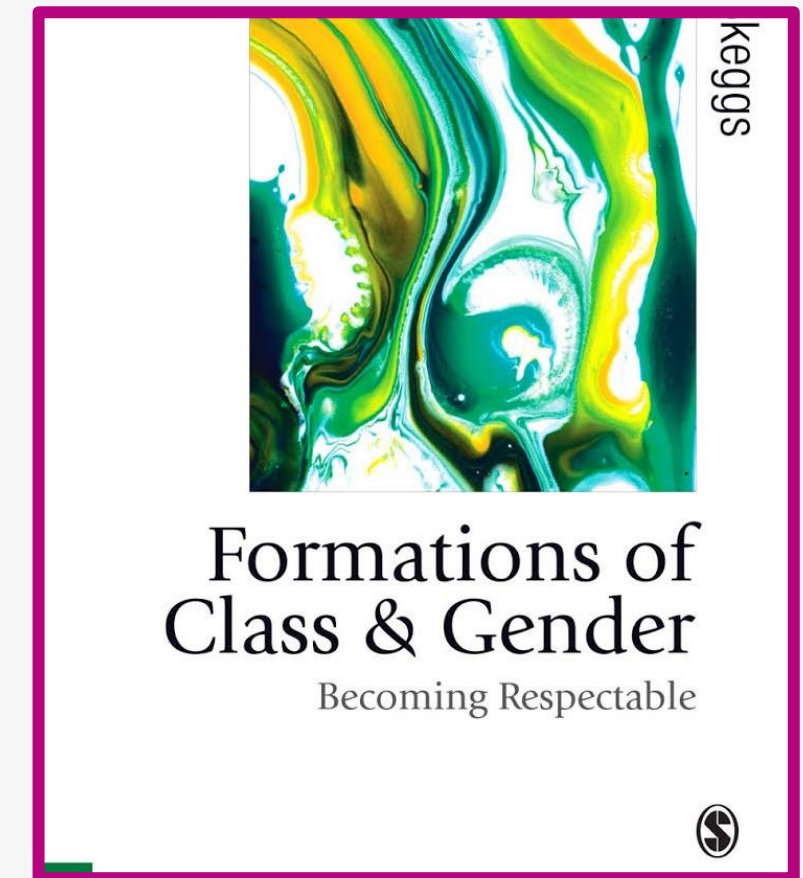
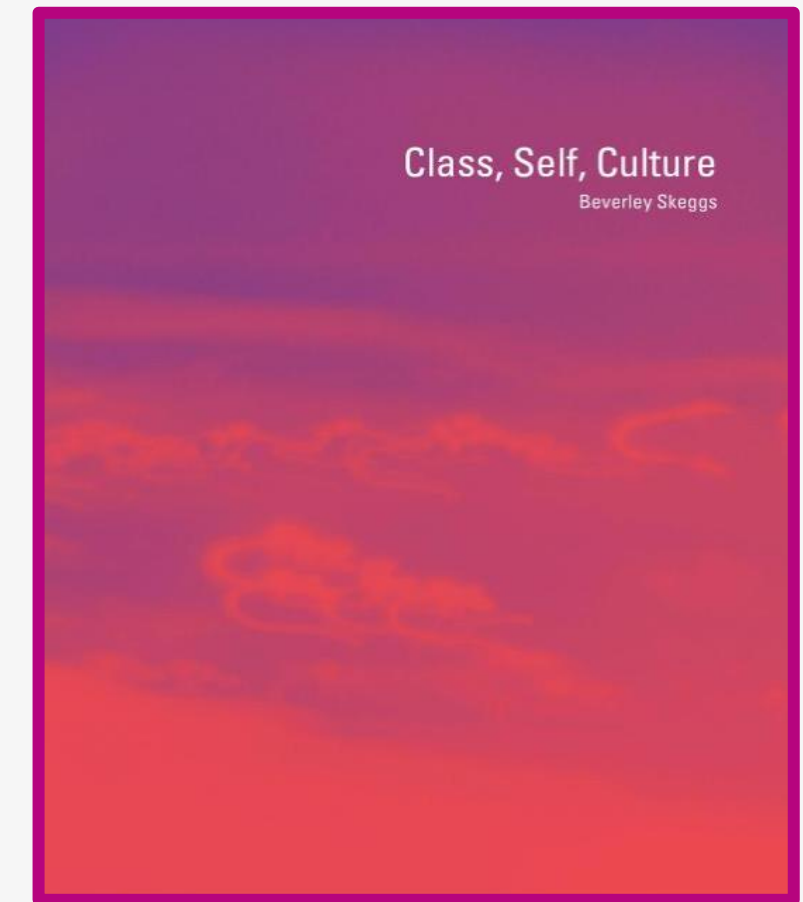


**The Sociological Review**

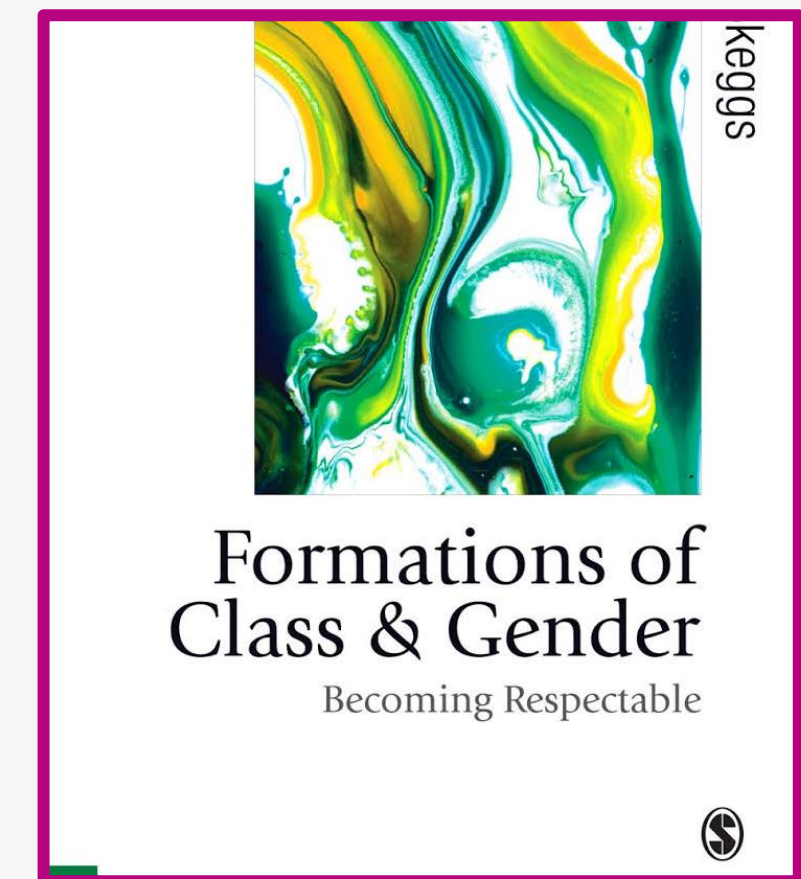
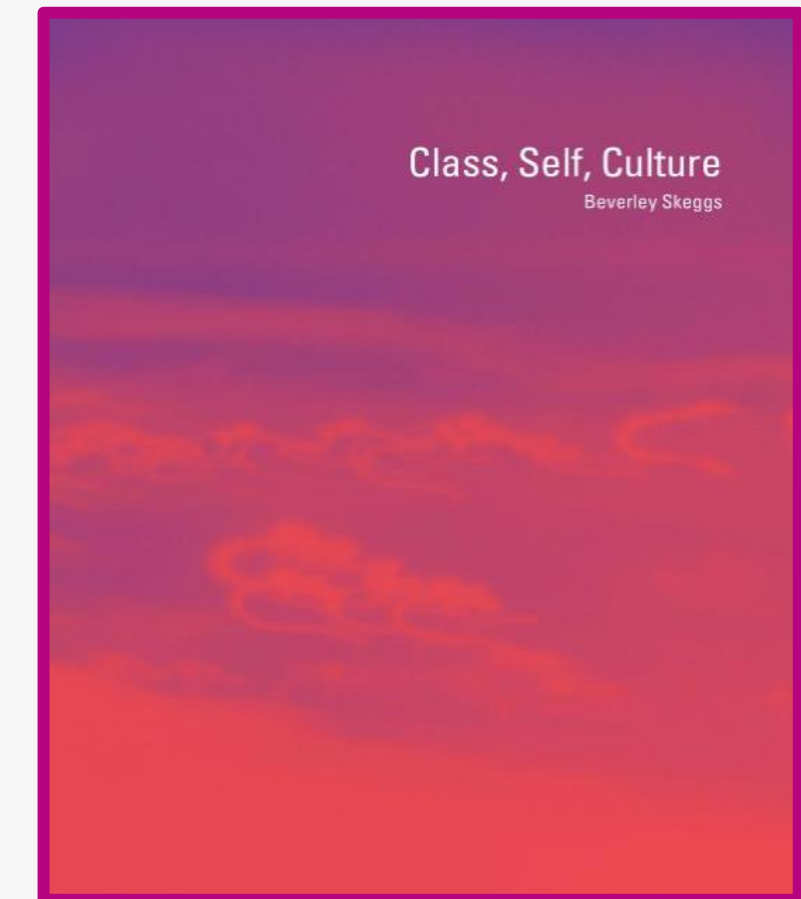
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- E.P Thompson type Marxism (lived class as an antagonistic relation)
- **Paul Willis “Learning to Labour” and Bev Skeggs “Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable” and “Class, Self, Culture”)**
- Both use a Marxist model of class based on the division of labour but includes gender and culture (Bourdieu)
- Judgment of a perceived lack of value was central to how the women formed their subjectivity through a defensive reaction.
- Claiming and performing respectability were ways to say: “I have value, don’t put me down”.
- They refused to identify with the term ‘class’ as it was always a way of degrading them (dis-identification)



- Class is a social position that informs how we think of our selves: as a self with a subjectivity. Historically only the upper middle class had “individuality”, the rest were “mass”
- The historically inherited middle-class perspective about the idea of class is built into institutions that protect middle-class interests such as: education, law, social work.
- Class relations are institutionalised
- BUT.....The imposition of middle-class value through these institutions always produces resistance (otherwise people would have to live in state of constant devaluation) eg Paul Willis’s “Learning to Labour”
- For young working-class women motherhood is often the site of battle; they do not accept the standards of care that are imposed upon them. Eg sending children to boarding school, going to work. Motherhood is a moral battleground, significant to class struggle.



# Imogen Tyler: Classification Struggles

Classificatory Struggles: Class, Culture and Inequality in Neoliberal Times

## 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.

The Sociological Review



# Class War?

There has been 30 yrs. of trying to eradicate the term 'class' from political, popular and academic discourse, however as Warren Buffett (13<sup>th</sup> most powerful people in the world, the second richest man in the US; the 4<sup>th</sup> richest billionaire in the US) notes:

**“There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”**