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First Left, Guv? Mapping the Class-encoded Agency of Commercial Television's Spy-cop Archetype, 1967-1978

Philip Kiszely

Abstract

This article examines depictions of class-encoded agency in the English spy operative and police detective protagonists that appeared on commercial television during the late 1960s and 1970s. Its purpose is to discover connections between constructions of this agency and class-based discourses relating to what Michael Kenny (1995) has termed the 'first New Left' (1956–62). The focus of attention is *The Sweeney's* DI Jack Regan (John Thaw), the most recognisable and fluent expression of the male 'anti-hero' archetype in question; but in order to frame an analysis that deals with interrelationships at the level of metanarrative, the article also traces a process of genre interconnection and development. Considerations of class in series such as *The Sweeney* (ITV 1975–8), *Callan* (ITV 1967–72) and *Special Branch* (ITV 1969–74) tend to offer meaning along the lines drawn by the likes of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, as well as other figures associated with the first New Left. The article proposes that key first New Left themes – working class men finding 'voice'; empiricism–theory binaries; Americanisation–anti-American discourses – not only provide an historical/contextual lens through which to view class-encoded agency, they also constitute a mechanism through which it is expressed.

Keywords: class-encoded agency, first New Left, E.P. Thompson, cop-spy archetype, television, empiricism

Introduction

In this article, I examine depictions of class-encoded agency in the English spy operative and police detective protagonists that appeared on commercial television during the late 1960s and 1970s. I deal primarily with the most recognisable and fluent expression of this male ‘anti-hero’ archetype, *The Sweeney’s* DI Jack Regan (John Thaw), a focus which makes this enquiry synchronic in some respects. But in order to side-step what might otherwise become an ahistorical deconstruction of a single character, a diachronic narration of genre interconnection and development frames specific text analysis. The class issue at the heart of the work is complex. Writing some years ago, Sheila Rowbotham and Huw Beynon (2001: 3) complained of a long-standing ‘fog of confusion’ surrounding the theoretical discussion of television and class. And to a large extent the same is true today.¹ I therefore avoid what are, for my purposes here, the blind alleys of recent conceptual exploration, much of which considers class as an adjunct to central issues of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. I opt instead to look to older discourses, particularly those related to what Michael Kenny (1995) has termed the ‘first New Left’ (1956–62). How do first New Left values and debates inform constructions of the aforementioned class-encoded agency? In my attempt to answer this question I turn first to E.P. Thompson, whom David Kynaston (2014: 57) describes as ‘the dominant figure of the left during the late 1950s and early 1960s’. Taking as my starting

point Thompson's historiographical approach to class formation and affective change, I go on to apply a constructionist model of analysis which draws on the ideas of first New Left figures such as Richard Hoggart, Raphael Samuel, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Iris Murdoch, Charles Taylor and Barratt Brown. This work contributes to knowledge in two ways. In broad terms, it relates a screen presence that is synonymous with the late 1960s and 1970s to the wider experience – to paraphrase Thompson (1963: 8–9) – of men making class happen. More specifically, it discovers within the series in question a mirror image of wider New Left discourses still in general circulation during those turbulent years. I propose in this article, then, that these dialogues not only provide an historical/contextual lens through which to view class-encoded agency, they also constitute – in terms of characterisation and narrative – a mechanism through which it is expressed.

The series I consider in detail are *Callan* (ITV 1967–72), *Special Branch* (ITV 1969–74) and, as indicated above, *The Sweeney* (ITV 1975–8), all of which were broadcast by Thames Television, the latter two being associated with their Euston Films franchise. Together, these series represent a genre-wide development that might best be termed, a transition from glamour to grit. And nowhere is the nature and scale of this change more clearly evidenced than in the respective incarnations of *Special Branch*. While it is true that aspects of the first two series recall the gritty atmosphere of the *Armchair Theatre* anthology, the sartorial and lifestyle significations associated with protagonist DI Elliot Jordan (Derren Nesbitt) invite comparison to the flamboyant aesthetic of shows like *The Saint* (ITV 1962–9), *The Baron* (ITV 1966–7) and *Department S* (ITV 1969–70). The latter two *Special Branch* series, products of an overhaul by a newly involved Euston Films, fully anticipate the look and feel of *The Sweeney*. By the early years of the 1970s, the wholesale departure from what had

become the familiar hallmarks of mystery, luxury and sophistication could scarcely have been more marked. Nor could the overall impact and appeal of this shift. In 1970, for example, Edward Woodward won the BAFTA Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of eponymous hero David Callan, a character resurrected from death – Sherlock Holmes-style – in response to public demand for another series. ITC Entertainment’s short-lived *The Adventurer* (ITV 1972–3), by contrast, marked a nadir for ‘action-adventure’ entries, its ratings dismal, the format not only tired but jarring in the context of widespread industrial unrest and the ensuing oil crisis. With the show’s demise the ‘international jet set’ element fell out of favour, as did the freelance nature of the spy/investigator figure.ⁱⁱ

Regan, like Callan and Special Branch protagonists Alan Craven (George Sewell) and Tom Haggerty (Patrick Mower), is drawn from the kind of the working class background defined by Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). Described by Lez Cooke (2003: 16) as an ‘individualistic’ police detective violently at odds with his professional context, the Regan character usually managed to meet his own measure of success – as Cooke says, he ‘apprehends villains’ – despite the broad Establishment constraints of the Metropolitan Police Force, on the one hand, and, more directly, the Flying Squad’s embrace of an increasingly ‘progressive’ operations ethos on the other. The positioning of Regan’s professional function within these antagonistic institutional cultures points to an organising principle that unifies all the narratives concerned – the same rituals of conflict characterise Callan and Special Branch.ⁱⁱⁱ This hierarchical integration is composed of the following semantic components:

- Values – represented by a senior management figure who is distanced from the field of engagement

- Methods – represented by a middle-management figure who is at one less remove from the field of engagement
- Applications – represented by a government spy or police detective figure who is in, or close to, the field of engagement

The inter-relationships between these elements combine to form a metanarrative through which points of class conflict are played out to varying degrees of resolution. The presence of this device at series level enables an effective mapping of that conflict onto each episode. This in turn mobilises the key themes – working class men finding ‘voice’; empiricism–theory binaries; Americanisation–anti-American^{iv} discourses – which relate the archetype (a figure associated with the past) to first New Left preoccupations and debates. It reflects, too, on-going discourses concerning the ‘managerial society’, which had emerged, as Freddy Foks (2017) notes, during the post-war era, and which fermented within that same first New Left arena. As the bitter industrial conflict of the 1970s escalated, so the resentment of bureaucratisation and managerialism grew. Unlike the ordinary run of working class characters populating the era’s series, drama, soap opera and comedy, the spy-cop archetype occupies a position of relative power, working within the Establishment even as he rails against it. This ‘insider’ role, indicative of social mobility and professional competence, makes class-encoded agency a site for conflict and a clear and defining characteristic.

Voices from the past, voices of the present

The Making of the English Working Class traces, as Thompson (1963: 8) puts it in the book's Preface, 'an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning'. The working class, he states famously, 'was present at its own making' (ibid.: 8). The process he subsequently outlines draws its momentum from an oppositional positioning; the figures at the heart of the book rail against others 'whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs' (ibid.: 8-9). The substance of Thompson's narrative, then, is the experience of that struggle. This 'socialist humanism' approach drew on the ideas of philosopher Georg Lukacs (1923) and leftist literary figures such as George Orwell (1937). First articulated in 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', which was published in the summer 1957 edition of his journal, *The New Reasoner*, Thompson would go on to champion the concept through his association with publications such as *The New Left Review* and the *Socialist Register*. A focus on people and their experience was an attractive proposition for the progressive element of the British left, of course, keen to distance itself from associations with communism in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising.

Thompson's later work (1978), attacking structuralism and – by association – Perry Anderson's editorship of the *New Left Review*, reinforces the case for 'human' historicism, or the empirical mode, he had made right from those early years of *The New Reasoner*. In so doing, it rejects the Gramscian and Althusserian theory that had come to characterise British socialism during the latter half of the 1960s. This wider turn to theory continued during the '70s, moving ever more swiftly along continental philosophical lines. As noted by Anderson (1976) and Simon During (2007), the intellectual left deepened its commitment to figures like Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, as well as Marxists such as Theodore

Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin. By this time Thompson's influence in intellectual circles was in sharp decline, his call for empiricism something of a cry in the wilderness.

Yet his very English methodology, so vividly demonstrated through the ethnography of *The Making*, continued to resonate elsewhere, most notably in a domestic popular culture still enthralled by various incarnations of 'bottom-up' rebellion. And nowhere was its currency of more value than on the commercial television of the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s.

Driven by a steadily emboldened empirical spirit, producers and directors began to abandon the security of studio and tape in order to capture the nuance of real-life conversations on the streets, and in pubs, clubs, houses and the workplace. Here, then, in location-based shows like *Special Branch* and *The Sweeney*, and through an associated aesthetic described by Max Sexton (2014) as 'gritty realism', English working class 'heroes' would depict a modern imagining of the agency traced by Thompson in his bestseller.

Published by Victor Gollancz in 1963, *The Making* was an ethnographic tour de force that caught the cultural moment. But Thompson's skilful handling of a compelling subject-matter does not fully account for the remarkable impact of his book. Raphael Samuel's historiographical approach is comparable in many respects, particularly during his mid-1950s association with *Past and Present* (and later with *History Workshop*), but it was less familiar in the popular mind. By the beginning of the 1960s, of course, Samuel had distanced himself from his first New Left comrades; Thompson, by contrast, was at this time gaining popular exposure as the leading figure of the movement. Along with his fellow New Left thinkers, many of whom were extremely high-profile in their own right – literary critics Raymond

Williams and Richard Hoggart, novelist Iris Murdoch and cultural theorist Stuart Hall – Thompson would wield an influence that would quickly transcend intellectual and political circles.

A litterateur rather than a professional historian, Thompson was, according to Michael Kenny (1963: v) in his Introduction to *The Making*, ‘one part poet, one part romantic and one part political radical’. All of these elements, it is safe to say, fired a prose that Lara Kriegel (2015: 87) has called ‘heroic’. And this is perhaps where the real appeal of the work lay. Kenny (1963: v) – again – notes a debt to the conventions of the novel:

The book offers a clear, over-arching narrative structure, and is filled with minor characters and leading protagonists whose struggles to overcome the most pressing of circumstances were documented and dramatised.^v

Such a technique raised fundamental questions about historiography, as noted by Anderson (1980), Hayden White (1978) and anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1990). Nevertheless, Ann Curthoys (2015), building on her work with Ann McGrath (2007) and John Docker (2010), presents a convincing case for the literary approach and its potential for bringing the past to life. Thompson’s book was successful in one other key respect: it narrativised historical processes that were, in many ways, being revisited in the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. These mid-twentieth century shifts constituted a new kind of making, one which was unprecedented in its complexity and capacity for contradiction. ‘Great history,’ remarked E.H. Carr (1961: 32), ‘is written precisely when the historian’s vision of the past is

illuminated by insights into problems of the present.’ By this measure *The Making* was great history, for all its supposed historiographical shortcomings.

As the 1960s gained pace, relative affluence had for some considerable number of the working class resulted in a process of embourgeoisement. J.H. Goldthorpe (1968) traced the arc of this phenomenon across an influential series of studies, beginning with *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*. In the wake of such sweeping social change and despite anxieties surrounding divisive issues such as immigration, an unprecedented sense of confidence began to assert itself. Attractive male role models, some of whom were ubiquitous – Sean Connery, the Beatles, Michael Caine – and all of whom were sharp-witted and stylish, helped forge new, or ‘modern’, working class identities. In some quarters, opportunities for social mobility were accompanied by a nod towards the ‘revisionism’ of Anthony Crosland and Hugh Gaitskell, a far-reaching inclination that would result in the election as Prime Minister of Harold Wilson in 1964. And many others would travel still farther along this route, turning their backs on the Labour Party and all it stood for. Elsewhere the opposite was true, with the rejection of middle class aspiration prompting a renewed sense of consciousness and solidarity. The assertiveness of this latter tendency, unthinkable a generation before, crystallised a few years later in the militancy of the early 1970s.

These complex social processes – on-going and mutating throughout the ‘70s – were rehearsed weekly across the series in question, from scene to scene and via their most fundamental of meaning-making binary oppositions. Television spies and cops act against criminal antagonists – that is their franchise – and there are key elements of inter- and intra-

class conflict within this episode-level dramatic action, many of which serve comparatively to delineate or evaluate working class agency and mobility along ‘straight’ (law abiding/enforcing) or ‘bent’ (criminal) lines. However, it is across the verbally-oriented managerial metanarrative – the site of interplay between values, methods and application – that the Thompsonian experience of struggle develops a longitudinal parallel that might neatly be termed a ‘struggle of experience’. As each series progresses, the minutiae of managerial sleight-of-hand plays itself out in perpetuity. In his *The Listener* review of Callan, Raymond Williams alludes to this quasi-existential element, noting the operative’s willingness to continue to work for employers he knows to be ‘self-evidently trivial, stylish, unfeeling and dishonest’ (1989: 176). The point is underscored by the fact that Callan is initially coerced into the Security Service, a plot element which, as Joseph Oldham (2017) notes, introduces the ‘secret state’ concern prevalent on television during the late 1960s and 1970s (and warned of by Thompson in his *Introduction to Review of Security and the State* 1978 [1979]). In some respects Callan’s dubious professional status sets him apart from the career coppers of *The Sweeney* and *Special Branch*. This notwithstanding, his compulsion to remain in the field of engagement is every bit as stubborn as that of Craven or Regan, illustrating by its very attrition an identical sense of individual strength, stamina – and agency.

The individual protagonists of each series combine to present a composite archetype, characterised, to a great extent, by a demand to be heard. While fulsome in his praise of Callan, which in his *The Listener* column he compares to the acclaimed work of John le Carre and Len Deighton, Williams felt that elsewhere this depiction of struggle – the refusal to be silenced – was unrealistic, at least in the subject-specific terms of public service

management structures (1989: 115). His summary dismissal of Special Branch – again in *The Listener* – is made on these terms:

Modern management, which is now the characteristic form of authority, seems to me rather different, in tone and style, from these snapping egos taking responsibility, taking over, glaring and rasping at each other (ibid.).

Criticism here refers to the series in its first incarnation, in which Derren Nesbitt plays fashion-conscious DI Elliot Jordan. Differentiation between Jordan and his immediate superiors, two much older men played sequentially by Wensley Pithey and Fulton MacKay, manifests itself in a generational currency immediately discernible to the Baby Boomer target audience. Jordan's attitude, opinions and ideas are signified by the importance his wardrobe, especially in the colour recorded episodes. *The TV Times* (8-14 August 1970) hailed the arrival of a second series with 'Why they invented the copper in kipper tie', a promotional retrospective by John Deane Potter. 'First the old-fashioned image of policemen wearing long raincoats and greasy trilbies was dispensed with,' he notes. 'Instead, Jordan with his trendy clothes, short raincoat and kipper ties was substituted.' For Williams, such fixation with luxuries merely served to underscore the 'cosiness' of runaway consumerism and political apathy. Struggle in this context, at least as far as he was concerned, was just 'implausible noise' (1989: 115).

In its subsequent incarnation, however – the Euston Films version of the Special Branch – the noise gains differentiation, with regional accent becoming pronounced enough to function as a significant marker of class identity. This development reflects the spirit of

contemporaneous enquiry into the importance of accent and its meanings, most notably the work of Basil Bernstein (1971) and Peter Trudgill (1976), whose contributions to the burgeoning field of socio-linguistics were era-defining. But it also acknowledges a debt of style to the cultural output that became synonymous with the first New Left, in particular the social realism of British New Wave film, television drama, and series like the police procedural *Z-Cars* (BBC 1962–5). Unlike Jordan, Stoke Newington-born DCI Alan Craven, played by George Sewell, is a world away from glamorous figures like Jason King (Department S, Jason King [1971–2]), as is Patrick Mower’s northern working class DCI Tom Haggerty. Both characters betray traces of dialect, contrasting sharply with the cut-glass enunciation of Establishment figures such as Whitehall mandarin Charles Strand.

The active function of language in *Special Branch* is laid bare during ‘Diversion’ (tx 2 May 1974), a remarkable episode in which the substance of the series-level metanarrative becomes the subject-matter of an individual show. Here values, method and application clash, in deep crisis, as Strand’s erratic behaviour attracts official attention. He is identified as a security risk, and as a consequence middle-management task Craven and Haggerty with conducting a discreet internal enquiry. During the briefing, which is conducted by Commander Fletcher (Henry Jaeger), Haggerty rails against the constraints of systemic authority. Throughout the episode, Mower draws deeply on working class indignation for character motivation; he positively seethes contempt for the upper class Strand, his regional accent sharpened in the heat of dissent. The scene concludes in a coda, with all three characters pausing at the door as they leave the office. It is Fletcher, the voice of authority, who brings the exchange to a conclusion by putting Haggerty in his place: ‘We all have our weaknesses; yours is your mouth.’

During the next sequence a similar debate plays itself out, in an officers' club, this time with Craven gesturing to check Haggerty's aggression with a tongue-in-cheek apology: 'He just forgets himself now and again.' By this late stage in the series Sewell's Craven character has evolved to function as a moderator, of sorts, in much the same way George Carter (Dennis Waterman) will act for Regan in *The Sweeney*. But Craven, the older man, calls on experience, and so words of wisdom here are identified with the past. Carter, by contrast, is young and forward-looking, more accepting of new methods and fresher by comparison. New as the format may have been, the re-vamped Special Branch looked to the past, in terms of its aesthetic and its 'angry' protagonist, in order to rail against the present. Like Regan and Craven – and as young as he is – Haggerty is resolutely an 'old school copper'.

Haggerty is the prototype Regan; Mower is the first, in fact, to utter Thaw's definitive line, 'Get yer trousers on – yer nicked'. The character represents a locus of development, with language and regional accent functioning as directional indicators. Haggerty builds significantly on the important defining aspect of accent that is evident in a smaller way in David Callan. The concept is taken to its logical conclusion in *The Sweeney*. '[P]roducer Ted Childs,' noted the *Sunday Mirror* (5 January 1975), 'said the only thing making him take it easy with the cockney dialect is so that it can be understood around the world.' Indeed, the series title is of course rhyming slang for Flying Squad. In his review of 'Ringer' (tx 2 January 1975), the first episode of the series, Partrick Stoddart (2 January 1975) deciphers the sobriquet in an appropriate tone: 'The Sweeney? Sweeney Todd, mate. The Flying Squad.' For Stoddart, accent and vernacular do more than merely denote class, or intimate an earthy vitality; dialect, in the form of rhyming slang, represents a desirable acquisition, a prerequisite for access to the exciting world on offer. 'If you have lived around the parts of

London where speeding police cars and the crackle of radios are part of the background sounds, you'd know about the Sweeney,' he states. 'And now, thanks to Thames Television, the rest of us can catch up.'

If, as William H. Sewell Jr. (1986: 5) notes, one of E.P. Thompson's lasting contributions to historiography was to 'show how workers could be given voices and wills and could be constituted as a collective agent in an historical narrative,' then that spirit is replicated by screenwriters like George Markstein, Trevor Preston, and Troy Kennedy Martin, all of whom made language and accent forceful instruments in the mouths of working class characters like Callan, Haggerty and Regan. However, some reviewers found the 'voices and wills' of these characters too forceful for credibility, their complaints echoing Williams' aforementioned objection to depictions of managerial etiquette. This scepticism was particularly evident in relation to the Regan character. From the beginning, even as they praised the pilot in every other respect, reviewers balked at the nature of utterance. 'Regan is too insolent for belief,' maintained Shaun Usher (3 January 1975), 'treating his masters with the blistering frankness real minions reserve for daydreams.' Yet this conflict through dialogue reflected the spirit of extensive industrial unrest during the early 1970s. Indeed, the series-level metanarrative, for all its macho posturing and overblown conflict, positioned class as an over-arching concern. In this sense, it echoed the day-to-day reality of the picket lines.

The poverty of theory, a wealth of experience

In spring 1965, screenwriter Troy Kennedy Martin addressed an audience of students at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). He had been invited to speak by Richard Hoggart, the Centre's director, and joined a remarkable roster – Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Roy Strong, Raymond Durnat, Daniel Boorstin and E.P. Thompson, among others – which made up the Tuesday Seminar series for that session. Kennedy Martin's contribution, 'Experiments in TV Drama', considered the possibilities for a new formal style in a medium ripe with potential. His visit to Hoggart and the CCCS came just under a year after the publication of his influential 'Nats Go Home: First statement for a new drama for television' polemic, which appeared in the March–April 1964 issue of *Encore*.

In 'Nats Go Home' Kennedy Martin set out the case for a 'theory' of television drama. The article proposes a break with the US-influenced television theatre tradition of the 1950s, claiming that, in this mode, most of the dramatic content is derived from dialogue – with the visual adding little by way of information (1964: 24). In order to illustrate the point Kennedy Martin highlighted the limitations of the close-up, questioning its ability reveal character (*ibid.*: 25). The concentration on the verbal, he noted, lent precedence to interpersonal relationships even as British television plays tended to follow 'didactic Marxist' (*ibid.*: 22) approaches to socio-economic conditions, an irony he was happy to point out. He championed intellectual montage, elongated duration and alienation effects. The new form he advocated, then, rested upon the freedom of the camera. Drawing as it did on 'story rather than plot', his vision for one-off drama drew heavily on the fluid aesthetics of the then burgeoning series format – what he terms 'folk drama' (*ibid.*: 24) – with his own *Z-Cars* being the classic example.

Kennedy Martin was well placed to discourse on innovations in television. *Z-Cars*, on which he worked for two series from its inception in 1962, had been ground-breaking in its portrayal of working class policemen as fallible human beings caught up in complex and challenging scenarios, both professional and private. Kennedy Martin's subsequent contributions to *Redcap* (ITV 1964–6) helped further define the gritty police procedural series, although in this case the context was military. And it was here that he first worked with John Thaw, establishing an association with the actor that would continue across six episodes of *The Sweeney* between 1975 and 1978.

Kennedy Martin's turn to theory follows the prevailing wind in film studies, evident in the work of semiologists Roland Barthes and Christian Metz and discoursed extensively within the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema*. In some respects, 'Nats Go Home' joins Perry Anderson's aforementioned embrace of structuralism; but its spirit perhaps most accurately recalls earlier, more uncertain flirtations with theory by some elements of the first New Left. Their call had been voiced some five years previously, in 'The House of Theory', Iris Murdoch's contribution to *Conviction* (1958). Here Murdoch ponders the absence of socialist theory in Britain, drawing a conclusion that it is 'neither surprising nor deplorable' (220). She goes on to state: 'The British were never ones for theory in any case. We have always been empiricist, anti-metaphysical in philosophy, mistrustful of theoretical systems' (ibid.). It perhaps comes as no surprise, therefore, that the kind of aesthetic proposed in 'Nats Go Home' never properly materialised in that most populist of mediums, television. Even by the early 1970s the radical in television would still usually be located in the script, rather than via means of experimental formal technique. There were exceptions to this rule, of course, such

as John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (BBC tx 6 June 1974), but they were rare and 'Brechtian Television' remained a something of a novelty.

His theoretical position notwithstanding, Kennedy Martin's more memorable television output, from the mid-1960s onward, was series-based. It can most comfortably be placed within the tradition of empiricism, moreover; and, like his brother's *Regan*, the 1974 *Armchair Cinema* pilot for *The Sweeney*, it owed more to the spirit of Hoggart, Williams and Thompson than the structuralists who would follow in their wake. Even his success in overturning the television theatre-based script-visuals dynamic – in the process reducing dialogue and recasting much of its function – rests on a desire to depict experience that recalls the socialist humanism of Thompson. It was Hoggart, however, that other influential figure of the first New Left, and a key contributor to the Pilkington Committee Report on Broadcasting (1962), who would prove instrumental in setting the parameters within which this experience would unfold.

The Pilkington Report, as John Corner (1991: 8–9) points out, 'contrasted emancipatory and exploitative qualities within a broader framework that addressed social and educational inequality'. The report led to the Television Act (1964) which, as Laurel Foster (2013: 88) notes, '[P]ermitted the Independent Television Authority (ITA) to "mandate 'serious' programmes" to independent television providers.' A consequence of this development, she goes on to argue, was the emergence of a journalistic culture which influenced output during the 1970s (*ibid.*). For *The Sweeney* 'journalistic' meant verisimilitude: the shooting of sequence after sequence on the streets in order to create a drama that would emerge from, and reflect, the unforgiving 'law and order' environment of the early to mid-1970s.

Series creator Ian Kennedy Martin and producer George Taylor each laid direct claim to the new, location-based vision of the Regan pilot, both men maintaining that their commitment to this operational mode flew in the face the other's wishes.^{vi} Director Mike Vardy^{vii}, whose work at this time spanned Callan, Special Branch and The Sweeney, offers an insight into a broader sweep of the innovation, and his comments help locate Regan at the vanguard of sector-wide aesthetic development. 'Mike Hodges (Get Carter [1971]) was on the staff at Teddington,' says Vardy, 'and he persuaded Lloyd Shirley that drama could be made more efficiently on 16mm film and out of the studio environment.' He goes on to state:

Lloyd took this proposition to Brian Tesler and eventually to the Board of Thames. It took a while for the decision to be made, and as I explained the set up was very rushed and could have failed through lack of scripts and proper preparation, but everyone involved toughed it out and got the train on the track. This of course led to other companies following suit, particularly the BBC.

The BBC's 'answer' to The Sweeney was Target (1977–8), starring Patrick Mower as DI Steve Hackett. It ran for two series and all but copied the Euston Films street-violence-and-car-chase format.

Violent though characters like Regan and Hackett are, they are policemen whose agency functions within the organisational limitations of a crime prevention structure. The positioning of such characters – as agents acting for authority – posed something of a moral conundrum for some writers, especially when the depiction of the Establishment fell some way short of the easily differentiated villainous extreme of Callan and later series like The

XXX Man (ITV 1976–8). Such was the case with *The Sweeney*. Troy Kennedy Martin balked at glorifying the Flying Squad, whom he understood to be ‘fairly corrupt’ (Cooke 2007: 127). Consequently, he fell back on comedy as a means of debunking; but ‘deflating the macho image of the Flying Squad’, as Cooke (ibid.) describes it, tended to have the opposite effect to the original intention. As with the satire of *Til Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1965–75), the over-whelming popularity of the lead character indicates that this treatment of chauvinism was often misunderstood. Caustic humour could be indicative of a strain of reactive resilience, even potency; and it struck a chord with swathes of a massive viewing audience, many of whom were familiar with economic hardship and well versed in the dialogues of industrial dispute.

But if the words and actions of characters like Regan conveyed meaning beyond the vicarious thrill of self-assertion, they did so through a mechanism functioning beneath the surface conflict. Indeed, instances of class-encoded agency may further be defined, in this context, as emblems of a deeper enacting and imparting process that manifests itself through a tension between values, methods and applications. The point is illustrated in ‘A Cop Called Craven’ (tx 4 April 1973), the first episode of the revamped *Special Branch*. By way of introduction to Sewell’s new Alan Craven character, the audience finds him faced with a malicious charge of corruption. The episode draws its considerable power from a depiction of class conflict in a professional context which diametrically opposes the working class Craven with his sneering interrogator, Chief Superintendent Pettiford (Peter Jeffrey).

The past weighs heavily on ‘A Cop Called Craven’. Throughout the protracted interrogation scene Pettiford taunts Craven with his working class origins. Craven, it transpires, went to a

council school in Stoke Newington; he knew real poverty during the interwar years ('Round our way, the "Three Rs" were ringworm, rickets and rape'); and he was a non-commissioned officer in the army. These origins alone, according to Pettiford's logic, are grounds for jealousy of the 'old school tie'. And this, in turn, would explain the impulse to corruption. By telling Craven's backstory through the conflict of the moment, the episode allows for simultaneous observation and re-living processes; it connects with, and comments upon, a working class identity apparently long gone. As such it recalls the methodology in *The Uses of Literacy*. The element of hostility in the scene frames a reminiscence that Hoggart (62–85) termed the inter- and post-war 'them and us' scenario, a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the classes.

In the old fashioned interrogation room, remote from the progressive pulse of the modern world outside, a telescoping effect brings to life the rigidity of the class-encoded past. Craven, pitted against dubious methodologies and set of values defined by class, must defend himself in 'the world of the bosses' (ibid.: 62). And in order to extricate himself from the web of theoretical constructs woven by Pettifor, Craven falls back on empiricism – his trusted experience of the working class world. He gets out onto the streets, visits pubs and shops, and infiltrates the home of his opponent, Tony Ridgley (Tony Selby), by adopting an ordinary working class identity. Throughout the series much of his success in cases – his agency – depends on his ability to function within a working class environment. In occupying that space with ease and authority, and by capturing the traditional flavour of working class social exchange, Craven employs a particular methodology in order to achieve a set of objectives; not only is it depicted as being effective, it offers a definite alternative to preferred managerial theories and Establishment values, both of which combine to pursue the goal of

maintaining the social status quo. The working class protagonist brings Hoggart's 'Us' and 'our ways' into the world of 'Them' and gets results. This is the basis of David Callan's agency, of course; it is also the way in which Regan functions. The empirical, set in these contexts, goes beyond observing the post-war consensus. It imagines a kind of revolution.

And by looking to Thompson it becomes possible to further define the imaginary of revolution on these terms. In *Out of Apathy* (1960) he rejects the two usual models of revolution – the 'evolutionary' and the 'cataclysmic'. He offers, by contrast, an alternative route. 'Alongside the industrial workers,' he states, 'we should see the teachers who want better schools, scientists who wish to advance research, actors who want a national theatre' (170). This, for Thompson, represents a deployment of 'constructive skills within a conscious revolutionary strategy' (Ibid.). Through depictions of their agency, Craven and Regan – working class men within an organisational law enforcement structure – illustrate a means of enabling that strategy. They undermine the value system of the Establishment, or the gentleman's club, on the one hand, and frustrate the embourgeoisement of a theory-driven and remote middle-managerial stratum on the other.

Same again, George?

In preparation for the development of *The Sweeney* series, producer George Taylor authored a format – a briefing for screenwriters – which set out the basic parameters for each show.^{viii}

The document, which is undated, is remarkable in that it is the most extensive single primary

source to deal with character motivation and context. It describes 36 year-old Regan as ‘a tough resourceful detective ... who has been a policeman since he came to London from Manchester when he was 22’ (1985: 62). The character is ‘a total professional, a 24-hours-a-day-cop’:

His commitment to his career led to the break-up of his marriage. He is divorced but visits his eight year old daughter fairly regularly. His ex-wife is now preparing to re-marry. Regan finds it difficult to develop lasting emotional relationships with people. With women he is prone to casualness, although not promiscuity (ibid.).

An assessment of professional ethic – ‘contemptuous of the formality and bureaucracy which characterises much of the police service’ (ibid.) – complements the personal in this backstory (ibid.). Thaw’s tagline for the show, according to Taylor, might be summarised thus: “‘Don’t bother me with forms and procedures, let me get out there and nick villains’” (ibid.: 63). If the familiar ‘old school copper’ element invites comparison to the likes of John Mann (John Thaw), then the personal falls into the equally well-worn ‘kitchen sink’ category of Richard Burton (Jimmy Porter) and Albert Finney (Arthur Seaton).

Dovetailing these resolutely English reference points is something of an American influence. As with Burton’s ‘living in the ‘American Age’ lament, made after he blows tunelessly on a jazz trumpet, the Anglo and American make for an unexpected combination within and around Thaw’s Regan. Yet Thaw has been compared to the ‘rogue cop’ figure of Harry Callaghan (Clint Eastwood) in the Dirty Harry films (Cooke 2003: 116). That Thaw borrows in his characterisation, albeit more selectively, from US street cop characters like Telly

Savalas' Theo Kojak is also worth noting. Indeed, in 'Money Money Money' (tx 12 October 1978) a humorous instance of reflexivity involves Regan being referred to disparagingly as 'Kojak'. *The Streets of San Francisco* (ITV 1972–7), another high-rating US import, provided the template for the 'buddy' partnership Thaw would form with Dennis Waterman (see below).

By the mid-1970s, the ubiquitous presence of high-rating US cop fare on British television reflected the process of Americanisation that had impacted on the wider culture for decades. As with television series and drama, the American influence extended itself across other popular media in two main ways: first, via a means of simple cultural importation; and second, more complexly, through instances of domestic cultural production in which an American inflection is evident to a greater or lesser extent. Peter Cheyney's Slim Callaghan yarns, which began during the pre-war years with *The Urgent Hangman* (1938), are the first discernibly American English detective stories and are early examples of the latter category. But the most interesting case in point is *When Dames Get Tough* (1946). Written by cockney Stephen Daniel Frances about (and under a pseudonym of) crime-solving newspaper man Hank Janson, it marks the first entry in a long-running and hugely successful pulp novel series, setting a template that would emulate Black Mask era pulp narratives of the 1920 and 1930s. All but forgotten now, the sex-packed Hank Janson stories, driven by transatlantic first-person vernacular, thrived alongside a deepening fascination with the American that touched on almost all aspects of the burgeoning pop culture. Frances perfected the wise-cracking, rough-and-ready crime-fighter of English popular fiction; and it was from this source, as much as from anything else, that Thaw would draw his growling brand of toughness.

The US colonisation of British popular culture was accompanied by an inevitable backlash, particularly from the left. This had been evident even during the interwar years, with public figures such as Bertrand Russell and F.R Leavis registering dismay at what they perceived to be an escalating cultural hegemony. Their anti-Americanism was in some respects indicative of fear or snobbery, but it also expressed a genuine alarm at the spectre of mass culture.

Leavis, in particular, equated Americanisation with standardisation and anti-intellectualism.^{ix}

More pointedly, Thompson (1951) considered America's pop culture to be a dangerous distraction, shifting the focus away from the issues surrounding working class identities and struggles. A few years later Hoggart (1957: 202–5) would present the new 'teenagers' of café bars and dance halls negatively, dismissing them as pseudo-American 'Juke box boys'.

It would be only a matter of time before this traditional anti-Americanism became something of default position for a younger generation who, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, would fall decidedly out of love with imported US culture. Precedents for this rejection had been set by the counterculture radicalism of the 1960s, of course, especially in response to the Vietnam War; but a broader swathe of youth-oriented anti-Americanism found its voice in the mainstream proper via the rather more one-dimensional sneer of punk. 'I'm So Bored with the USA' (1977), by The Clash, singles out cop shows in particular, complaining of them being 'always on the TV'. Ostensibly a manifestation of this contemporaneous anti-American backlash, *The Sweeney's* position in relation to the American influence was in fact more nuanced. Certainly, it plundered US pop culture (as did anti-Americans like The Clash), but it did more than simply take and sneer; the show appropriated not only transatlantic dramatic convention but also elements of political discourse, displaying both in its values-methods-applications dynamic. The result of this process reflected the complexities and

contradictions inherent within the attitudes of the previous era, most strikingly those of the first New Left.

Such complexity and contradiction, on the intellectual left at least, tended to revolve around a set of lively equality discourses and, by extension, emergent notions of working class agency. In the early days of the mid- to late 1950s, the term 'Americanism' held many associations, some positive in their seemingly uncomplicated connection to the notion of 'class-lessness'. In a 1958 edition of *The New Statesman*, for example, Hoggart attributed the popularity of American novels to the fact they were 'less class-defined' than most contemporary British fiction. That same year, in his contribution to *Conviction*, he equated Americanisation to class-lessness, this time celebrating 'folksy' American voices on radio by way of example (135-6). This 'dressed down' informality, so refreshing in the 1950s, would find renewed vitality during the 1970s, a resurgence due in no small part to the action-driven, banter-laden conventions of the buddy narrative.

In *The Sweeney* it is the buddy convention, America's gift to the English cop show, which mobilises what is essentially a re-tread of the 'kitchen sink/social realism' theme. The 'angry young man' legacy, lingering in the aging Regan character, is also present to some extent in Carter, the youthful half of the buddy duo. Waterman's character is, according to Taylor's format, 'A tough, sharp Cockney who hails from Notting Hill. A working class lad on the make' (1985: 63). The aspirational drive is career-oriented in Regan, but it is rather more finely drawn in Carter, with questions of ambition being linked to the personal as well as the professional. The producer devotes space to a description of the Carters' marriage. In so doing, he actively foregrounds 'hypergamy', the sociological concept which, as Lynne Segal

(1988) has noted, fuels the domestic conflict in *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Carter's middle class wife is 'a school teacher with ambitions', writes Taylor, hostile to 'Regan's charismatic influence' over her husband:

Mrs Carter believes her husband should endeavour to climb onto the promotional 'gravy train' the CID amalgamation has engendered instead of hanging around pubs and clubs with informants. She feels her husband would be better employed studying for promotion examinations and indulging in that measure of sycophantic behaviour necessary for advancement in any highly structured organisation (Alvarado and Stewart 1985: 63).

This social mobility, a site for conflict between the two detectives in Regan and the early episodes, frames an embourgeoisement thematic in the gendered terms of the British New Wave. But it also rehearses a connected, US-influenced debate about the 'problem' – to quote Iris Murdoch (1958: 227) – 'of the managerial society', still very much a conundrum in those pre-Thatcher years of the early to mid-1970s. Mrs Carter's desire to drag her working class husband into the middle class, in order to properly consolidate his managerial status, is predicated on an investment in the established hegemonic structure. This position recalls the Labour Revisionists notion of social progress, of course, which was in turn fashioned from the ideas of US theorists Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means (1932) and James Burnham (1941). Yet it was another American thinker, sociologist C Wright Mills (1951), who insisted that change could not be made effectively without sweeping reform of control in the direction of the workers, an idea championed by first New Left figures from Thompson to Charles Taylor and Barratt Brown. The aforementioned treatment of Craven in *Special Branch* illustrates this view; and it is endorsed by Regan's influence over Carter, which is in no way

idealistic or overtly political but does nonetheless actively function to pull the younger man back from the Burnhamite position. Any lingering disagreement between the Regan and Carter characters is resolved, neatly enough, with the death of Mrs Carter, murdered in the street by a hit and run driver.

Conclusion

This article has considered the class-encoded agency of commercial television's spy-cop archetype, mapping late 1960s and '70s depictions against a set of discourses which are associated with the previous era's first New Left. In some respects the 'Decade of Violence' (de Groot 2011) – a neat summation of the tumult of the 1970s – drew more energy from the 'Angry Decade' (Allsop 1958) of the 1950s than it did from the Swinging Sixties, the prosperous and optimistic middle years of the latter a far remove from the grimmer outlook that would follow. Indeed, in 1967 Callan would dispense with the consumer culture trappings often associated with the espionage/adventure genre, developing a parallel aesthetic that would have much in common with the '50s inflected 'kitchen sink' grittiness of *Public Eye* (1965-75) – and so be befitting of darker times. Yet the political and cultural upheaval of the middle '60s inevitably left its mark on the series in question; those years had, after all, dismantled many erstwhile social certainties, leaving in their stead a myriad of questions, opportunities and uncertainties. From anger to violence, the period spanning the mid-1950s to the late '70s would see the mobilisation of issues concerning feminism, sexuality and ethnicity – identity discourses that form the basis of much contemporary class-informed

critical theory and historiography. But the action-oriented cop-spy archetype presented what might be termed a ‘traditional’ vision of class and agency, a constructionist account of which this article has offered. *Special Branch* and *The Sweeney* reflected on-going debates within the contemporaneous broad left, certainly; but their depictions of agency tended to offer meaning only along lines drawn by the likes of E.P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. Younger generation doyen Perry Anderson famously branded this first New Left movement ‘Little Englanders’, dismissing their empirical mode as old fashioned, reductive and imprecise. Similarly, feminist Lynne Segal (1989) would castigate their insular, profoundly male outlook for its almost total lack of engagement with women’s issues and other aspects of equality. This point has been acknowledged in hindsight by key figures such as Stuart Hall and Charles Taylor (ibid.). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that location-based male ‘buddy narrative’ shows like *The Sweeney*, or lone-wolf operatives like David Callan, should echo so many first New Left concerns. The article has illustrated this point.

Hoggart’s work on the Pilkington Committee did much to set the aesthetic Williams would subsequently champion in his reviews of shows like Callan. Hoggart, too, helped promote intellectual dialogues between the first New Left and key industry figures, inviting Troy Kennedy Martin to speak at Birmingham CCCS. And the figure of Thompson looms large. The empirical mode, his pugnacious rebuttal of theory, his ‘lone wolf’ stubbornness, each is reflected in the spy-cop archetype and his relationship with authority. The Jack Regan character is ‘a juxtaposition of intellectual and earthy elements’ (Fairclough et al 2002: 68), both of which are afforded opportunities for maximum impact by Euston Films’ location-based film shooting ethos (Alvarado and Stewart 1985). This is true enough, as far as it goes; but this article has shown that the whole is more than the sum of parts when it comes to the

question of class. In exerting themselves, Callan, Craven, Haggerty and Regan all undermine an established values-methods-applications status quo; they do their jobs, yet they actively challenge the ideology underpinning the management structures dramatized in each series. As this article has demonstrated, empiricism is presented not only as preferable to theory, but as a means of combating the class structures theorisation is invoked to preserve. Like the dramatic structure of the later genre entries (and for all its insularity), the first New Left looked to the US for inspiration, particularly C. Wright Mills and his ideas about structural change and the 'Managerial Society'. The crux of the first New Left vision for change, which is detailed in *Out of Apathy*, is naïve in some respects. 'The New Left put their faith in community and the mutual interest it contains,' noted the *Times Literary Supplement* (1960) in its review of the book, 'demanding a standard of clear thinking and unselfishness that the ordinary man cannot bear'. The shortcomings of the Regan character – the rogue cop ala the American Harry Callaghan – are perhaps testament to the potential consequences this naivety. Yet the combative 'voice' of the spy-cop archetype did speak of affective change, just as the depiction of experience on the streets did offer a persuasive vision of agency.

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ⁱ Reality TV is arguably the most fertile ground for current class-based enquiry. Notable in this area is Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2011), *Reality TV and Class*, London: British Film Institute.

ⁱⁱ ITC Entertainment's *The Return of the Saint* (1978–1979) is the obvious exception. However, the continued fascination with Simon Templar owes much to the link with Leslie Charteris' literary character.

ⁱⁱⁱ These rituals of conflict are present in generically similar series like Yorkshire Television's *The Sandbaggers* (1977–82).

^{iv} I use the words 'America', 'Americanisation' and 'anti-American' to refer to the United States and not to North America or the Americas more generally.

^v Victor Gollancz published a revised edition of the book in 1968.

^{vi} Ian Kennedy Martin details the quarrel on the ‘Sweeney: A preamble’ page of his website,

<http://www.iankennedymartin.com/page4.htm>

^{vii} Email correspondence with the author, 11 January 2017.

^{viii} The document, which is housed in The Sweeney Special Collection at the British Film Institute, has been reproduced in full by Alvarado and Stewart (1985).

^{ix} Raymond Williams provides a graphic illustration of Leavis’ attitude in “Seeing a Man Running,” in Denys Thompson, ed., (1984) *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.