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Article

Economic martyrs and moralised others: The construction of social class in UK media during the 'age of austerity'

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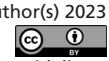

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Abstract

This article describes the key findings of a study which critically analyses the construction of social class within UK media during the period 2010–2016 – part of the 'age of austerity'. Focusing upon 240 newspaper articles covering six topics (emergency budget, welfare reform, workfare, bedroom tax, food banks and zero-hour contracts), the study provides critical insights into how class is constructed in an important context: namely that of economic downturn and rising inequality. The findings suggest that a pro-austerity discourse dominates the coverage. Here austerity is described as necessary, and the idea of 'unavoidable scarcity' forms the basis for a 'moral divide' between a vague in-group – the 'ordinary hardworking people', defined by their idealised struggle and selfless sense of duty – and an exploitative 'other'. This both legitimises austerity and masks its broader impact. As the impacts become more apparent, however, challenges to the dominant narrative begin to appear. In the course of these challenges, the struggle inherent to class is placed back on the agenda, and class is increasingly constructed as an 'anxious concept' – a slippery slope down which one might fall.

Keywords

Austerity, bedroom tax, discourse, food banks, media, social class, welfare reform, workfare, zero-hour contracts

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Introduction

In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, the UK Labour government rescued the banks, incurring a public debt of £850 bn (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012: 43). This issue of public debt formed the key focus of the 2010 election, with the incoming Conservative-led coalition government vowing to 'balance the books', largely through cuts to public spending and reforms of the welfare state: thus began the 'age of austerity' (Stanley, 2014). This article describes the key finding of a PhD study (Marsden, 2020) which critically analyses the construction of social class in the UK media within this context, not only focusing upon *how* class is constructed, but also reflecting upon *why* this may be and, importantly, *to what likely effect.*

Social class is an ambiguous concept (Bourdieu, 1987; Kerswill, 2018; Tyler, 2015), and as a result it is open to being discursively constructed (Bourdieu, 1987). Since class lacks a defining feature (see Kerswill, 2018: 294), placing emphasis upon different criteria can have the effect of manipulating the boundaries of classes (Bourdieu, 1987); something which can be exploited to serve political and ideological goals (Bourdieu, 1987; Skeggs, 2005). A critical focus upon class construction in the media during a time of fundamental political and social change (Farnsworth and Irvine, 2015: 1–3) is therefore of great importance. The media have been shown to exert significant influence upon public perception and opinion (McCombs, 2005), and as such they are well positioned to 'classify'. In addition, the neutrality of the media has often been called into question (Ellman and Germano, 2009; Entman, 2007; Prat and Strömberg, 2013).

The way class is constructed within the cultural realm can have broader social and political consequences (Tyler, 2015). Skeggs (2005), for example, notes that class-making discourse often focuses attention on a proximate 'other', and their apparent breach of some accepted moral norm, in order to re-assert dominance during times of crisis and social change. Similarly, previous research has shown that while class is rarely discussed explicitly in the media, it is often implied in moral terms (e.g. Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2008, 2015). In addition to producing stigma and fuelling class discrimination (Tyler, 2015), this can obscure the structural causes of inequality, and influence public attitudes towards policies which might exacerbate it (MacDonald et al., 2014; Piff et al., 2018).

This last point is especially important in the present context. Austerity in the United Kingdom has consisted of 'a series of voluntary deflation measures involving deep cuts to public spending but without significant tax increases' (Forkert, 2017: 2). In particular, there has been a strong focus upon welfare spending, with widespread 'reforms' aimed at cutting payments and increasing conditionality (Forkert, 2017: 2). Alongside cuts to public spending, there has been a drive towards further privatisation (Forkert, 2017: 2) which has seen stable public sector jobs replaced with a proliferation of insecure work (Heyes, 2013). Austerity has proved both controversial and problematic. As well as being criticised on economic grounds (Forkert, 2017; Krugman, 2015), it has had a disproportionate impact upon the poorest members of society (Forkert, 2017: 2; Hastings et al., 2015), fuelling an ongoing rise in inequality and, in many cases, pushing people into poverty (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; O'Hara, 2015).

The study described in this article focuses upon class-making discourse (Skeggs, 2005) within newspaper coverage of six key topics – the 'emergency budget' (2010), the

Welfare Reform Act (2012), the 'bedroom tax', workfare policies, zero-hour contracts and food bank reliance – during the time period 2010–2016. The rationale for focusing upon newspapers is that, in addition to being influential, they tend to cover political issues more explicitly than other forms of media, and in a way which is more openly partisan (see Cushion et al., 2018).

The topics were selected with reference to the wider literature, and with the aim of covering the whole of the time period by focusing upon early theoretical discussion, the enactment of austerity policies and their subsequent impacts. Coverage of the first two topics, the 'emergency budget' and the Welfare Reform Act (2012), was taken from the period 2010–2012, a time when discussions centred on austerity 'as an idea' (Stanley, 2014: 896). Coverage of the bedroom tax and workfare – two key austerity policies (Friedli and Stearn, 2015; Gibb, 2015) – was taken from the period 2012–2014. Both policies have proved controversial; the bedroom tax, or 'under-occupancy penalty' to give it its official title, which sees social tenants lose up to 25 percent of housing benefit payments for having unoccupied bedrooms (Gibb, 2015: 148, 158), has led to financial hardship among those already disadvantaged, and the breaking of essential community support networks upon which these people rely (Gibb, 2015; Moffatt et al., 2016). Similarly, workfare policies such as 'mandatory work activity' and the 'community action programme' have proved problematic in that they have stigmatised the unemployed at a time of job losses, have normalised the idea of sub-minimum wage labour and have seen increasingly harsh sanctions applied for non-compliance (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). Coverage of zero-hour contracts and food bank reliance was taken from the period 2014–2016. These topics arguably represent the most visible aspects of insecurity and poverty, both of which have increased due to austerity (see Brinkley, 2013; Cooper et al., 2014; Davies, 2015; Dowler, 2014; Loopstra et al., 2018).

Method

Using the *Nexis* database (https://www.lexisnexis.com), articles were selected from the print and online versions of the eight highest circulating newspapers (as of 2010): *The Daily Mail, The Daily Express, The Guardian, The Mirror, The Sun, The Times, The Daily Star* and *The Telegraph*. Forty articles were selected for each of the six topics (five per publication) for a total of 240 articles overall.

Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes. Specifically, the method described by Attride-Stirling (2001) was followed. Articles were carefully read and codes assigned to capture the semantic meaning at the micro-level. Similar codes were then grouped together, allowing themes to emerge. Attention was also paid to the *relationship* between themes in order to accurately 'map' the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Mapping the data in this way allowed for the selection of a smaller number of articles which were then analysed in greater depth following the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA). An important point to note here is that CDA has often been criticised for working with small amounts of 'cherry picked' data (Widdowson, 1995). The initial use of thematic analysis largely addresses this concern, however, since it allowed articles to be selected on the basis of them featuring examples of patterns seen within the broader discourse.

CDA is concerned with the role discourse plays in power relations, abuses of power and domination (Van Dijk, 1993: 254). It is a 'problem oriented' approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 2), with the starting point to any analysis being the identification of a social problem: an injustice of some kind that is in part shaped by discursive practice (Fairclough, 2013: 19). Accordingly, the study was approached from the perspective that inequality – the very condition underpinning class disadvantage (Tyler, 2015) – is inherently problematic, and that austerity, with its disproportionate impact upon the poorest members of society, could only serve to exacerbate this problem. Furthermore, the construction of social class was considered to be of central importance to the discourse, in that it has the potential to shape understandings of, and attitudes towards, inequality.

Following the dialectical–relational approach (Fairclough, 2013), the analysis was therefore conducted by focusing upon specific features of the text which have the potential to classify people. In particular, the following questions were kept in mind: first, what classes are being constructed? And upon what criteria are distinctions being drawn? Second, what effect might these classifications have in terms of how inequality is viewed? Finally, acknowledging the dialectic relationship between discourse and the wider social structure (Fairclough, 2013: 4), what might the intention behind such classifications be?

In the following sections the key patterns that emerged from this critical analysis are described and discussed.

Economic 'necessity' as the basis for moral distinction

In order to make sense of the way class features within the discourse, it is necessary to start with the coverage of the first two topics: the emergency budget and the Welfare Reform Act (2012). The coverage of these topics was taken from the period 2010–2012, a time when austerity was discussed largely in theoretical terms (Stanley, 2014).

What immediately becomes clear within the coverage of these topics is the extent to which austerity is portrayed as being unavoidable. This is important since it forms a contextual basis for drawing distinction. The following extract is a typical example of the way in which a 'necessity narrative' is developed:

> George Osborne yesterday launched a historic attempt to turn around the juggernaut of state spending. After decades of relentless expansion, the [then] Chancellor set out plans for nothing less than a dismembering of the welfare system and a rolling back of the bloated public sector. Unveiling his ambitious reforms, Mr Osborne told MPs: 'Today is the day when Britain steps back from the brink, when we confront the bills from a decade of debt. (*The Daily Mail;* emergency budget, 21 October 2010)[1]

Note the heavy use of metaphors. Musolff (2012) argues that metaphors serve to oversimplify concepts within a debate, reducing the potential for critique by removing all but the basic elements needed to formulate the point being argued. Here, the subtle medical metaphor of the 'bloated' public sector draws upon understandings of illness to guide the intended reading – to be bloated is to be swollen to an *unhealthy* size. The reference to a 'brink' (albeit as part of a quote) serves to emphasise the gravity of the situation. The

heavy use of metaphors is a recurrent feature of the discourse, one which has the effect of reducing a complex economic issue to a simple either-or choice between austerity and economic ruin.

Economic martyrs and moralised others

Previous research has demonstrated that class inequality is often legitimised through reference to the supposed moral failings of the lower class 'other' (Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2008, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014). Yet, as Haylett (2001) notes, the *form* these apparent 'moral failings' take tends to reflect the 'economies and sensibilities' of the time (p. 353). The idea of necessary austerity changes these 'economies and sensibilities', and therefore the criteria upon which moral distinctions are made. Put simply, with emphasis placed upon unavoidable scarcity, the moral standard becomes one of dutiful belt tightening, of selfless sacrifice and of idealised struggle. This then forms the basis for classification; with a divide drawn between those who, in the context of economic downturn, recognise the need to strive, to contribute, and to accept less in return, and those who either do not recognise the 'necessity' of this or, worse, *choose* to act in self-interest regardless:

> When most of us are working our socks off to provide for our families, why should others get to sun themselves on easy street? (*The Daily Star*; welfare reform, 29 January 2012: 6)

> An ever-growing population of scroungers is feeding off people who work and pay their taxes. (*The Express*; emergency budget, 07 September 2010: 12)

Note the vague terms used when describing the 'moral in-group' – 'most of us', 'people who work and pay their taxes'. This is a recurring feature of the discourse, with terms such as 'taxpayers', the 'hardworking' and the 'squeezed', serving the purpose of defining a 'class' solely on the basis of selfless sacrifice and idealised struggle.

This does two things: first, the vague construction of the in-group, as one united by shared morals alone, pushes key differences *among* these people entirely from view. Most notably, from a class perspective, it omits any reference to that which Tyler (2015) argues is the very basis of class: economic inequality. While the moralisation of some classed 'other' has been noted previously, the construction of the 'in-group' has received far less attention, yet here its importance becomes evident. Omitting any reference to economic inequality has the effect of obscuring the different stakes members of this 'group' have in austerity. Given that insecure work has increased following the economic crisis (Heyes, 2013) owing in part to austerity itself (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012), cuts to public spending and welfare clearly run counter to the interests of many within this 'group' . Yet the emphasis on idealised struggle, and the subsequent construction of a 'moral divide', have the effect of manipulating class boundaries (Bourdieu, 1987) in such a way as to bring them onside regardless:

> . . . the Mail has highlighted families living on small incomes who are determined to be self-reliant and to avoid becoming trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency. Sadly, it has also been

> easy to find examples at the opposite end of the moral scale . . . (*The Daily Mail*; welfare reform, 28 January 2012)

Idealised references such as this to 'families living on small incomes who are determined to be self-reliant' have the effect of casting the low paid worker not merely as 'one of us', but rather as emblematic of the sound morals that *define* 'us'. These 'economic martyrs' play an important role within the discourse in that they forward the idea that to be *hardworking yet poor* is something of a badge of honour – a sign that one is fulfilling a duty to society in its time of need.

Second, the construction of a class defined by idealised struggle legitimises a 'crackdown' on those who are perceived to be holding us back as opposed to sharing our burden. From a class perspective this is particularly important: whereas the role moralising discourse plays in justifying inequality has been noted previously (e.g. Haylett, 2001; Tyler, 2008, 2015), here we see discourse which justifies actively *worsening* inequality. Indeed, the idea of a classed 'other' living comfortably at our expense while 'we' dutifully tighten our belts is a central tenet of the 'anti-welfare commonsense' (Jensen, 2014) that has accompanied the adoption of austerity. Under this 'commonsense' view, welfare is seen as problematic not only due to its cost, but because it supposedly undermines the national work ethic:

> William Beveridge envisioned a welfare system as a safety net for those temporarily down on their luck. It was not designed to fund the lifestyle choices of a feckless Jeremy Kyle generation whose idea of hard work is getting off the sofa to get another can of lager. In 10 years of Labour our welfare bill ballooned by £60billion to a staggering £192billion. (*The Express*; welfare reform, 05 February 2012: 40)

The reference here is to the *Jeremy Kyle Show*, a chat show that was popular at the time and often featured 'guests' selected to resonate with the underclass stereotype. The reference thus evokes an assumed understanding on the part of the reader as to the 'type' of person who is responsible for our economic woes.

Yet it is the use of the term 'generation' that is of particular significance here. Since the term has a temporal aspect, its use implies that things are getting *worse* – that this generation does not possess the work ethic of past generations. While previous studies in the area of social class have similarly pointed to 'narratives of decline' (Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2005), an important nuance becomes evident here in that the decline is not framed as a straightforward decline of the entire working class – indeed, as discussed above, the low-paid worker is often *idealised* within the discourse. Rather, what is implied is a decline in the willingness of 'us', to impose our values upon the 'others'.

The emphasis upon society's role in allowing, and even *encouraging*, an apparent costly moral breakdown is another recurring feature of the discourse. Consider the following example:

> The truth is that, as a country, *we have lost sight* of the importance of every citizen striving to contribute to society, however modestly, as opposed to making a claim upon it. As a result, perversely, those who won't contribute are treated the same as those who do. This injustice

> means that *they are given the right* to live handsomely off the labour of the rest of us. (*The Daily Mail*; welfare reform, 28 January 2012, emphasis added)

A key point to note in terms of how class is being constructed here is the way in which the 'others' are both moralised *and* passivised; while being *defined* by their moral failings, these failing are themselves portrayed as a result of *our* inaction. In the most basic sense, the 'other' is constructed in such a way as to seem *incapable* of moral reasoning – their apparent moral failing simply being the ease with which they will slip into a parasitic existence, regardless of the cost to society, when allowed to do so. This particular nuance is more significant than it might initially seem, since it has the effect of giving austerity a seemingly legitimate purpose – namely that of 'rehabilitating' such people. To demonstrate this, it is worth turning to the coverage of workfare and the bedroom tax. This coverage was taken from the period 2012–2014, a time when the impacts of austerity were starting to become clearer. It is worth noting that while a pro-austerity sentiment still dominates the coverage of these topics, discourse that is more critical has now begun to emerge.

A potentially redeemable 'class': austerity as a 'magic bullet'

The following example, which is taken from the coverage of the bedroom tax, shows the way in which the classed 'other' is simultaneously moralised *and* passivised: note how the moral failings of 'fecklessness' and 'idleness' are linked with the idea of 'perverse *incentives*':

> Yesterday the [then] shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Rachel Reeves was at it again, wailing that the withdrawal of spare room subsidies for public housing tenants – misleadingly dubbed 'the bedroom tax' – is 'a cruel and unfair policy'. But there is another side to the welfare state, one that continues to provide perverse incentives towards fecklessness and idleness on an epic scale. For all Labour's emotional blackmail the fact is the gargantuan benefits system, which costs taxpayers about £220billion a year, still enables far too many claimants to evade their responsibilities to their families and wider society. (*The Express*; bedroom tax, 02 April 2015: 12)

It is difficult to see *how* having a spare room, in some cases an unwanted one (see Moffatt et al., 2016), can lead to 'fecklessness and idleness', especially given that a significant proportion of those affected by the bedroom tax are in work (Moffatt et al., 2016). In light of this, the apparent aim here is simply to reinforce the 'commonsense' (Jensen, 2014) link between moral breakdown and redistribution *in general*.

The author of this extract does seem to implicitly acknowledge a growing backlash against austerity here. The term 'wailing' is suggestive of an overly emotional, irrational, indeed almost childlike outburst. Billig (1991) suggests that expressed views are often a 'stance in a controversy', and thus a stance *against* opposing views (p. 143). Applying this here, the framing of an opposing view as emotional and unreasonable serves to imply that the view in the report is the opposite: logical and well-reasoned. The growing

controversy surrounding the austerity measures as they are put into action might explain the increasing use of anecdotes within the discourse since, as Atkins and Finlayson (2013) point out, anecdotes lend credibility to the point being argued. With this in mind, note the use of an extreme real-life example as the report continues:

> That truth was illustrated this week by a shocking Channel 5 documentary which highlighted some of Britain's worst dads. One featured was Keith MacDonald, from Sunderland, who has fathered 15 children – with another on the way – by 10 different women despite reportedly never having worked a day in his life. It is estimated that with benefit bills for his children he will cost the taxpayer more than £2million. Described by one former lover as a 'waste of space', MacDonald is the ultimate illustration of our something-for-nothing society.

What is implied here is that such an example is extreme – an 'ultimate illustration' – only because we are *yet* to reach the point where such 'subsidised delinquency' is the norm. The subject of this report thus functions as a 'condensed figurative form' (Tyler, 2008: 18) – a physical representation of an entire problematic 'class' consisting not only of the feckless, the welfare scroungers and cheats (Cain, 2013; Jensen, 2014; Romano, 2015), but also the 'reproductively irresponsible', who burden society with yet more people 'just like them' (see Cain, 2013). The focus of the referenced documentary upon 'Britain's worst *dads*' seems to stand in contrast to moralised portrayals of single mums (see Haylett, 2001), and as such may reflect a change in gendered parental expectations. However, given that the author of this extract also takes aim at 'reprehensible women' who 'collude with this subsidised delinquency' elsewhere in the article, the focus here seems to be more opportunistic.

Similar patterns to those seen above feature throughout the coverage, as a whole range of underclass tropes are drawn upon to 'highlight' examples of the costly moral deviance this 'class' of people is all too readily 'incentivised' towards. But, and again this is a key point in terms of what class constructions are doing within the discourse, the fact that such people are portrayed as being 'perversely incentivised' ensures that much of the blame is laid squarely at the feet of society itself – or more accurately here 'our something-for-nothing society'.

In the most basic sense, the portrayal of the lower class other, in the context of austerity, appears to be analogous to the sediment that will naturally settle on the bottom of the tank when 'we' fail to stir the water – and such a construction suggests that for all their failings these people are, at least *potentially*, redeemable. This lends great flexibility to pro-austerity arguments, even as the impacts of the policies become clearer. This is because it suggests that austerity, like a 'magic bullet', has a punitive impact *only* in the case of the straightforwardly immoral – that is, those who *actively* resist pulling their weight and instead *choose* to exploit us. In the case of those who have 'simply been encouraged' into a parasitic existence austerity comes to be seen as a means of correcting, and even *rescuing*, them:

> Being expected to work in return for payment is not demeaning. It is what the vast majority of us have to do every day. Work gives shape and meaning to our lives, however much we might gripe about it on occasions. Far more heartless is how the unemployed have been treated for decades: doled out weekly payments with minimal conditions attached. For too many people

> the result is that they have been allowed to settle into a life of welfare dependency. (*The Express*; workfare, 01 October 2013: 14)

The effect of this is that any notion of the 'deserving poor' (see Romano, 2015) is driven out of the debate. Instead the deserving become simply the 'less culpable', those who tend towards the path of least resistance and who have become trapped in dependency as a result. This shifts the emphasis away from *financial* help for the poor – at precisely the time when it is needed most – and towards behavioural modification (sees Friedli and Stearn, 2015) instead. Note, for example, the way in which it is suggested in the example above that the unemployed must be taught to recognise the *intrinsic* reward of work; something the 'majority of us' already do.

Class as a struggle: an emerging critical narrative

As noted above, there is a break in the media consensus at this stage, with coverage that is more critical of austerity beginning to emerge. Here, the class constructions which lend legitimacy to pro-austerity views are often directly challenged:

> Not only do such [workfare] 'placements' do little to help the unemployed into work, they are clearly replacing and undercutting paid employees. There is now a determined backlash. In Motherwell in Scotland, a man who refused an instruction from his local jobcentre to work for his previous employer for six months without pay had his dole money stopped as punishment. Last week, the firm pulled out of the scheme after it was the target of 'slave labour' protests. (*The Guardian*; workfare, 19 November 14)

The emphasis upon the principled stance taken by the subject to his own financial detriment (as well as reference to his extensive work history as an 'electronics specialist' later in the article) calls into question the construct of a parasitic other who pursues their own gain regardless of the moral implication. In addition to challenging the idea of a moral divide, such discourse also re-classifies, in that it emphasises *what is common* to working people and those who are (currently) unemployed; namely an increasingly precarious economic position; note, for example, the point about workfare 'replacing and undercutting paid employees' in the example above.

With regard to workfare, the more critical coverage is largely limited to the left leaning publications (*The Mirror* and *The Guardian)*, yet in the case of the bedroom tax critical coverage occurs sporadically across most publications. This may reflect an acknowledgement of the inherent unfairness of imposing a de facto tax upon those unable to downsize due to lack of alternative accommodation (Gibb, 2015); indeed such concerns are often explicitly raised. Alternatively, it may reflect a more fundamental clash between theory and reality: namely the inherent contradiction of claiming to be 'helping' people to 'stand on their own two feet' – a key theme of the pro-austerity discourse – while at the same time breaking up the community bonds essential to doing so:

> . . . there's a fundamental disconnect here. The thing we pride ourselves on in our working classes is their 'sense of community' [. . .] When you are not strong or wealthy enough to sort your problems out on your own – hire help, pay repair costs – you must tap into the unpaid,

> unseen economy of communal goodwill. In the most basic sense, you rely – more than someone in a higher income bracket ever will – on love. (*The Times*; bedroom tax, 05 October 2013: 5)

This extract is interesting in that it features one of the few explicit references to social class. Despite the more critical view of the bedroom tax and its impacts, however, the depiction of the 'working class' seen here is still somewhat problematic; not only because of the rather patronising way in which working-class people are 'spoken for', but also because it seems to suggest that 'struggling by' through hard times ought to be seen not as a problem, but rather as a source of pride. In other words, the author appears to be critical of austerity's impact upon the *ability* of these people to get by on low incomes rather than the underlying inequality which forces them to do so.

Nevertheless, the fact that more critical coverage can be seen to emerge in the coverage of workfare and the bedroom tax is significant, especially given that pro-austerity discourse was almost entirely unchallenged in the previous topics. It was thus within the context of breaking media consensus that the issues of zero-hour contracts and increasing food bank reliance were prominently covered.

Class as anxiety: putting downwards *mobility* on the agenda

The coverage of these topics is taken from 2014 to 2016, by which time the impacts of austerity were being widely felt (Cooper et al., 2014). These topics likely represent the most visible, and thus newsworthy, extremes of poverty and insecurity (Brinkley, 2013; Loopstra et al., 2018; Perry et al., 2014). Arguably, therefore, these topics serve as focal points in a broader debate. Their prominent coverage appears, at least initially, to have put the issue of economic insecurity firmly on the agenda:

> At its worst this rapidly proliferating practice reminds me of the way dockers used to have to gather at the dock gates in the 1920s and a foreman would come out and point to those he could use and tell the rest to go home with no money in their pockets. To expect people to pay their bills and raise a family under employment conditions like this is just not on. (*The ExpressOnline*; zero-hour contracts, 18 April 2014)

A similar pattern can be seen within the food bank coverage. A good example is the following extract, where a 'professional working couple' (as they are described in the article) are quoted as saying,

> We are a hard-working family and never buy anything on credit. We are proud of being able to provide for ourselves and didn't want to beg off someone else. So going to the food bank was our only option. We were a bit embarrassed . . . There was a real mix of people there. We expected to see homeless people or those fighting addiction. But there were also professional workers, older people and families. (*The Mirror*; food banks, 16 April 2014: 4)

It is significant that the subjects are depicted as an 'everyday family', as people who share the sound morals of the rest of 'us' – that is, a strong work ethic, responsibility and a sense of pride in being self-sufficient. This makes their struggle seem not only unjust

but also, and in keeping with the earlier point regarding precarity, *unforeseeable.* Note that despite *expecting* to find homeless people and addicts at the food bank, the subjects instead encountered people *just like themselves*. This extract thus reads almost as a warning to the reader; after all if 'ordinary people' can suddenly and unexpectedly find themselves plunged into poverty, then the implication is that such a fate *could befall anyone*.

If the reference to 'professionals' in the extract above seems to hint at an impact that has perhaps gone 'too far', then the following example leaves the reader in little doubt:

> People in affluent middle-class areas like Cheltenham, Welwyn Garden City and North Lakes are increasingly turning to food banks after running out of cash, according to a new charity report published today . . . They include an increasing number of working people unable to make ends meet, particularly those on zero-hours contracts. (TheTimes.co.uk; food banks, 09 June 2014)

The newsworthiness of this report appears to derive from the inherent shock of seeing those traditionally considered to be secure, facing hardship. Arguably, what is being constructed here is not just a class defined by precarity, but rather *class itself*; since such discourse appears to tap into, and may even reflect, intrinsic fears of 'slipping down' the social order (Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2015) – fears that are likely to be greater where one has further to fall (Jetten et al., 2017). While moralised discourse might provide the illusion of a 'safe distance' during times of economic uncertainty, by implying that poverty is something brought upon oneself (see (Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014), this anxious construction of class, as something akin to a 'slippery slope', sees this sense of security swept away.

An 'achievement at risk': re-establishing 'common-sense' narratives

Clearly, the prominent coverage of zero-hour contracts and food bank reliance is accompanied by a more critical – and anxious – reflection of class inequality. Yet in the course of the ensuing media debate, this is itself countered by those subscribing to a pro-austerity viewpoint in a seeming attempt to re-establish the 'common-sense' narrative. Here, the idea of a class of people defined by the ease with which they are encouraged into costly moral deviance is again drawn upon. For example, one article which (incorrectly: see below) refers to a food bank user as a 'benefits scrounger' states,

> Daniel Shaw gets almost £1400 a month in handouts – more than many hard-working Brits earn. But the serial convict complains it's not his fault he hasn't worked for two years. In a shocking new TV documentary Daniel says: 'It's the Government's fault because they're making me pick the easy way'. (*The Daily Star*; food banks, 23 October 15: 11)

It is worth noting that, at the time of publication, the subject of this report was no longer in receipt of welfare, having found full-time employment (Waterlow, 2015). It is also worth mentioning that the suggestion that food bank users are simply exploiting free goods is contradicted by research evidence (Loopstra et al., 2018). Yet factually accurate

or not, the account given here presents the subject as a 'representative' of a supposed class of people who will waste or exploit any help they are given. This shifts the focus of the debate away from the issues of poverty and insecurity and re-fixes it upon the idea of 'incentives' – suggesting that sympathy for the very poor is the thin end of the wedge, that it ultimately risks unwittingly encouraging idleness and irresponsibility, and thereby undoing what austerity has 'achieved':

> The implication of the [food bank] campaigners is that the Government should abandon welfare reform and instead provide every claimant with enough cash to live a comfortable lifestyle without having to work. But it is precisely that attitude that got Britain into such a terrible mess under Labour. The benefits system not only became unaffordable but also provided perverse incentives towards mass idleness and personal irresponsibility. Thankfully, due to the tough decisions taken by the coalition, this disastrous culture of welfare dependency is at last in retreat . . . But that achievement would be put at risk if the siren voices of the Left, full of synthetic indignation, had their way. (*The Express;* food banks, 17 April 2014: 14)

Clearly, the construction of a class of people defined by their propensity to be 'incentivised' in this way is one which legitimises doing *nothing* in response to poverty – with the logic being that this will then 'incentivise' them to help themselves. But of course people cannot pull themselves up 'by the bootstrap' unless the opportunity to do so exists, and it is significant in this respect that the concerns raised regarding rising insecurity within the coverage of zero-hour contracts are themselves countered by a narrative of 'opportunity'. Here 'flexibility' – or, from a workers perspective, insecurity – is cast as a means of freeing employers from their shackles so that they might 'reach down' to the people:

> For many business owners, zero-hours contracts let them flex their labour force to scale up when it is busy and scale back down when it is quiet. They also enable employers to hire people without the worry of big ticket items such as long term sick leave, maternity leave or holiday pay. (*The Sun*; zero-hour contracts, 03 April 2015: 11)

Thus in the case of big business, *doing less* becomes equated with *doing more* – with offering 'opportunity' even during difficult times. In the case of working people themselves, however, the moral expectation is, again, that they must respond to economic downturn by doing more for less. Note the term 'big ticket', which implies that such things as 'sick leave, maternity leave and holiday pay' are extravagances which must dutifully be sacrificed. So too, presumably, is the security of guaranteed hours. Again, an idealised image of the low paid worker is constructed; one which represents the best in 'us'; not just the embrace of dutiful sacrifice, but an identity defined by hard work and a 'recognition' that it is not the quality of a job that counts, but rather the intrinsic reward of doing it:

> A job is better than no job. It is the reason why, in the 1930s, people marched in their thousands to demand work. They marched for *the dignity* of bringing home a pay packet. (*The Sun*; zero-hour contracts, 29 March 15: 16–17, emphasis added)

Put simply, the construction of the 'idealised worker' is the construction of a *class against itself* – a construction which works to justify worsening the structural conditions faced by working people by suggesting that this is in *their* best interests.

Conclusion

In order to make sense of the way social class is constructed with the coverage of these topics, it is necessary to situate the coverage itself in the broader context of austerity. Here, social class is constructed as part of two distinct discourses, these being a pro-austerity discourse and a more critical 'alternative' discourse. The pro-austerity discourse is, generally speaking, dominant across the coverage, and this raises the following questions: Why might the media be predisposed towards supporting austerity? What purpose, then, do constructions of class serve within the discourse?

Supply-side theories of media bias (see Prat and Strömberg, 2013) offer a plausible explanation for the pro-austerity stance taken by the media. In the case of the commercial media, factors such as direct ownership and business links (Berry, 2016; McChesney, 2004) predispose the media to bias in favour of business interests (Berry, 2016). Thus, when events such as the economic crisis disrupt the status quo (see Peck, 2010), the media might be expected to exert their influence in favour of responses that serve these interests. Austerity, broadly speaking, is one such response. Offloading the debt incurred in rescuing the financial sector onto society sets a precedent for insulating financial elites from risk, while reductions in public spending free up capital that would otherwise be re-invested in society. Most relevant from a social class perspective, however, is that through the resulting combination of decreased bargaining power, coercion and the normalisation of low-paid insecure work (see Briken and Taylor, 2018; Friedli and Stearn, 2015; Heyes, 2013), the working population is effectively forced to increase its *competitiveness* (see Nunn, 2008).

This last point is particularly important. Indeed, the way class is constructed within the pro-austerity discourse is in keeping with this very sentiment. By portraying austerity as unavoidable, the moral standard becomes the willingness to *do more*, supposedly in the interests of society, yet *expect less*. This particular moral standard then serves as the basis for classification. Those conforming to this standard are grouped together; they are the 'ordinary hardworking people', united by their shared morals and exemplified by the 'economic martyr' figure of the low-paid worker. The emphasis upon shared morals and romanticised struggle forwards the idea that 'we' are 'all in it together'; pushing economic differences from view, and with them the unequal impact of factors such as cuts to public spending and welfare (Hastings et al., 2015).

At the same time, a sense of 'justified anger' is stirred up at those who appear to fall short of this moral standard. The construction of this group draws upon various 'underclass' tropes (see e.g. Cain, 2013; Romano, 2015; Tyler, 2008; Valentine and Harris, 2014) – all rolled together into one exploitative 'class'. Finally, the fact that these people are *both* moralised and passivised makes them ripe for 'correction', giving austerity a seemingly legitimate purpose; that of making them share in 'our' struggle. Thus, insofar as the question of *relational* fairness between the low paid worker and the moralised other with which they are contrasted arises, it is always the latter who

must be pushed down 'into their place' as opposed to the circumstances of the former being improved.

It is not difficult to see how moralised accounts of class could gain traction during a period of economic uncertainty. People like to feel that society is fair since this provides a sense of security and control (Piff et al., 2018; Tyler, 2015; Valentine and Harris, 2014). Such portrayals likely played a role, therefore, in ensuring initial public acceptance of austerity. Yet as the true impacts became apparent, and as an increasing proportion of the public came to realise, often through bitter real-life experience, that austerity does not target some imagined 'other', the legitimacy of this discourse is likely to have become stained. At the same time, ongoing changes in the media, especially the increasing prominence of 'new' media (see Aruguete, 2017), may have rendered any backlash all the more visible. This is significant in terms of the media stance. Since news outlets derive part of their income from sales, they have an incentive to produce content that resonates with their audience. With reference to demand-side theories of media bias (see Prat and Stromberg, 2013), therefore, a growing public backlash might explain the emergence of coverage which is more critical with regard to the impacts of austerity on 'ordinary people'.

Furthermore, as the impacts deepened it is possible that those traditionally considered secure were brought face to face with insecurity, either personally or vicariously (see Stenning, 2020; Tyler, 2015). Insofar as this might include some working within the media (Stanistreet, 2011), it is plausible that a degree of polarisation on the issue of austerity would arise. Increasing challenges to moralised portrayals of class, and the foregrounding of spreading precarity may therefore reflect concerns that the impacts have gone 'too far', with the resulting discourse constructing an anxious view of *class itself*, wherein the fate of the poorest seems to offer a glimpse of the abyss into which (any)one might fall.

To sum up, this research makes a contribution to the literature by focusing critically upon media portrayals of social class during an important period – one in which inequality rose as a direct result of public policy. The findings likely have broader relevance also, in that they may shed light on the cultural construction of class, and its implications, in the context of economic downturn more generally. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with a 'cost of living crisis' looming large, this would certainly be an area worth investigating further. Also of interest would be the degree to which public perceptions of class have been shaped by both media coverage and lived experience throughout the 'age of austerity', as well as the effect that media accounts seen throughout this period may have had upon stigma and class discrimination. Further research in these areas would, of course, expand upon the interpretations offered within this discussion. Finally, the idealisation of 'ordinary hardworking people' is an interesting finding, and one that would be worth investigating further – especially in light of the valorisation of 'key workers' during the recent pandemic (see De Camargo and Whiley, 2020). Previous research has looked at the moralisation of classed 'others' in various contexts, yet the idealisation of members of the moral 'in-group', and what purpose this might serve, have received far less attention.

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1. Page numbers are provided where available. All articles can be accessed at https://www.lexis-nexis.com

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