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What do we know about class in Television Studies?

Laura Minor, Beth Johnson, Anna Viola Sborgi, Dave O'Brien

Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive overview of class in Television Studies, focusing on public service broadcasting in Britain. We examine both off-screen and on-screen dynamics, investigating workforce composition, commissioning processes, production practices, and representation across genres, with a particular focus on drama. By synthesising research from scholars, industry professionals, and policymakers, we trace the evolution of class depictions from early social realist plays to contemporary outputs.

On-screen, our analysis illuminates how class narratives have evolved and intersected with broader societal changes in PSB dramas throughout the 2020s. Off-screen, we investigate the television industry's employee makeup, highlighting significant class imbalances, especially in key creative roles. We also assess the impact of diversity initiatives and shifting viewing habits on class representation and industry dynamics. Throughout, the paper underscores the importance of an intersectional approach, exploring how class interacts with factors such as race, gender, and regional identity in both production contexts and televisual content.

A central finding is the television industry's paradoxical approach to class: while working-class stories are increasingly visible, structural inequalities persist both on and off-screen. The paper concludes by suggesting future research directions to foster a more in-depth understanding of the complex relationship between class, television production, representation, and reception in contemporary Britain, addressing gaps in current scholarship and methodologies.

Keywords: Social class; television; intersectionality; production; representation; audiences; Public service broadcasting; drama.

Introduction: where is class on TV?

Class is now a well-established topic in the TV industry. This interest is not only a consequence of spiralling inequality after years of austerity but also a response to the exacerbation of pre-existing socioeconomic disparities due to COVID-19. Class is present from policy concerns about working-class access to the sector, to the notable inclusion of class in BAFTA awards winners' speeches. What, though, does the re-emergence of class mean for television? We aim to address this question by reviewing existing literature on class and television in this article. In doing so, we hope to shed light on both the challenges and opportunities that this renewed focus on class presents for the television sector.

The paper begins by considering what we know about class in the UK television industry, specifically focusing on public service broadcasting and reflecting on how class influences television production, representation, and audience reception. We then provide an overview of the current televisual landscape, exploring workforce dynamics and structural inequalities in the industry and their impact on off-screen class dynamics. Next, we consider on-screen representation, delving into the history of class portrayals in public service broadcasting by specifically focusing on drama, comedy, reality TV, and youth-oriented programming. Considering both on-screen and off-screen dynamics, we assess the effectiveness of creative diversity initiatives and examine the role public service broadcasters play in addressing inequalities. Here, we acknowledge the importance of applying an intersectional perspective/analysis, examining how class intersects with other identity markers such as race, gender and region.

The paper then traces the evolution of class depictions in drama, with particular attention to how shows in the 2020s navigate class issues, highlighting emerging themes and the importance of regional representation. Throughout, we consider how industry practices have shaped the visibility and understanding of class on television, addressing the paradox of its simultaneous acknowledgement and denial. By synthesising the existing research – both from academia and industry – we provide comprehensive insights into the current state of class representation in UK TV. With class inequalities now firmly positioned back on the political agenda, alongside more nuanced and intersectional representations on screen, it is essential to take stock of what we know about class on and in television, to understand the contextualised factors that have shaped why it has ‘come back’. This article offers a unique contribution in its synthesis of current research about class across television production, representation, and audience reception at this crucial moment.

Class’s moment in the spotlight

In many ways, class is now finding its moment in discussions about the TV industry. In 2023, BAFTA created a new resource titled *Invisible Barriers* to help creative leaders become more ‘class aware’ and inclusive in their practices (BAFTA 2023). Building on this momentum, the Creative Diversity Network (CDN) announced plans in 2024 to enhance its data collection by adding new questions about socio-economic background to the Diamond questionnaire forms (CDN 2024: 4).

Discussions of class, social mobility, and socio-economic backgrounds also dominated the Edinburgh TV Festival. The prestigious MacTaggart Lecture, delivered by British playwright and dramatist James Graham, focused on television drama’s role and responsibility in shaping the political agenda, illuminating social injustices, and representing

social class and regionality. In response to these developments, the TV Foundation, the charitable arm of the Edinburgh TV Festival, announced the creation of a new Impact Unit. This initiative aims to help shape the TV industry's approach to addressing class and social mobility issues (Televisual 2024).

On Channel 4 News, the lack of representation in the creative workforce was headlined following the publication of research from the Creative Industries Policy Evidence Centre (PEC). This research showed that only 8% of the workforce in Film, TV, and Radio are from working-class backgrounds, the lowest figures in a decade (McAndrew et al. 2024; Stephenson 2024). Press coverage (Richardson 2024) has also examined the issue, featuring interviews with working-class creatives and highlighting a paradoxical situation within the sector. While there is a significant audience for working-class stories – *Alma's Not Normal* (BBC Two, 2020-), *Queenie* (Channel 4, 2024-), *Sherwood* (BBC One, 2022-), *Brassic* (Sky One, Sky Max, 2021-), *Big Boys* (Channel 4, 2022-) and *Mood* (BBC Three, 2022) – working-class writers often struggle to maintain a foothold in the industry. For those who do succeed, their exceptionalism can stifle the future stories they get to tell. As *Mood* creator Nicôle Lecky noted: 'You are one person. You can't represent your whole community. I'm like: "You lot who are commissioners, commission more people from the community who have different experiences!"'(quoted in Kahn 2022).

Television texts themselves increasingly address this paradox. Discussing the television comedy-drama *Alma's Not Normal*, created by and starring working-class creative Sophie Willan, Laura Minor (2023) points to the ways in which the series highlights the current 'fashion' for working-class-ness through its comedy. In series 1, episode 5, acting coach Ian (Dave Spikey) tells Alma and her fellow Boltonian students: 'Working-class people are in fashion now, we're like an exotic fruit, so juice that motherfucker kids. Juice it!' (S1, Ep. 5). In so doing, Minor argues, Willan draws critical attention to how the series

acts as a vehicle for ‘exploring intersecting axes of inequality, with the politics of class and gender frequently overlapping’ (ibid:146).

Despite the persistent myth of meritocracy remaining prominent among television industry insiders, ‘juicing’, in the context of the contemporary fashion for working-class stories, may, according to some creatives, better describe what television does *to* them rather than what they can do *to* it. While Spikey’s words act as a comedic punchline, the scene also works to provoke critical reflection on the frequent short-term diversity trends in the creative industries rather than commitments to long-term, structural change. Willan, a creative who spent some of her childhood in the care system due to her mother’s addiction, has spoken about the ways in which she found that her background caused her to encounter class and glass ceilings. She could not enter the TV industry until she received the Caroline Aherne Award to develop a comedy script for the BBC (quoted in Chortle 2020).

In addition to the class and glass ceilings referred to by Willan, when those who have been underrepresented are invited to share their unique lived experiences as writers, this can lead to exploitative practices. In a study looking at gender, genre and television screenwriting, Johnson and Peirse (2021) interviewed several female screenwriters, who drew attention to the problematic industry practice of inviting writers to engage in Writers’ Rooms to share their authentic experiences and ideas, while ultimately not then employing those writers to contribute episodes. This was a practice noted as particularly prominent in relation to both working-class and ethnically minoritised writers.

What do we know about class in the television industry?

Explorations of social class have long been central to British television story worlds. Class has long been a crucial theme of television texts across time and genres (from *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960-) to *Benefits Street* (C4, 2014-15), from *Desmond’s* (C4, 1989-94) to

Normal People (BBC Three, 2020), from *Shameless* (C4, 2004-13) to *The Crown* (Netflix, 2026-23), from *Chewing Gum* (E4, 2015-17) to *Fleabag* (BBC Three/BBC One, 2016-19), from *The Royle Family* (BBC Two / BBC One, 1998-2012) to *Happy Valley* (BBC One, 2014-23). Yet scholarly research on class and television has dwindled over the previous three decades. Notable exceptions to this include the work of Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs (2011, 2012), Sally Munt (2008), David Forrest and Beth Johnson (2017), Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005, 2008), and June Deery and Andrea Press (2017).

Much of this academic analysis has engaged with onscreen representation in reality TV and associated genres. Wood and Skeggs (2011) argue this area sees an over-representation of the working class which is both highly visible and highly problematic. Driven by changes in the political economy, specifically, cost of production, the rise of reality television aligned temporally with a political war on the welfare state (De Benedictis, Allen and Jensen 2017). Thus where there is an extensive presence for working-class individuals and communities on screen, it has been the ‘reductive and stigmatising’ representations found in programmes such as *Benefits Street*, *On Benefits and Proud* (Channel 5, 2013), *We All Pay Your Benefits* (BBC One, 2013) and *Britain’s Benefit Tenants* (Channel 4, 2015). This work has critical relevance for studies of class and television more broadly because the sensationalist portrayals of class that this work illuminates also appear in fiction-based genres.

Scholarship on British cinema and social class has a long and well-established history, from John Hill’s *Sex, Class and Realism* (1986), Jacob Leigh’s (2002) *The Cinema of Ken Loach* and Peter Stead’s *Film and the Working Class* (1989), through to two recent BFI classics focusing on *A Taste of Honey* (Williams 2023) and *Kes* (Forrest 2024). In the field of television studies, books focusing on social class (particularly those that sit outside of reality television) are rare, and on individual series (which often extend over 40 plus hours), are now

reserved for only the most internationally successful and complex shows, such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-08) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13).

Though specific publishers such as Manchester University Press (MUP) and Edinburgh University Press (EUP) include series on television such as ‘The Television Series’, focusing on screenwriters and creatives, plus EUP’s television monograph and ‘Television and ...’ series, individualised academic monographs on specific television shows are, on the whole, no longer commissioned for publication in the UK. The impact of this, including the decommissioning of texts on television as part of the BFI TV Classics series, is detrimental to the field of Television Studies. Where books on individual films are perceived as worthy of attracting a broad readership and sit firmly within cultural hierarchies of taste, texts on television (with rare exceptions) are not. Place and space have emerged as particularly fruitful lenses for intersectional analysis in television studies. For example, Ina Rae Hark (2021) demonstrates how spatial analysis can illuminate intersections of class, gender, and regional identity. Work on space, place, and drama has also paid attention to race and masculinity. Nwonka’s research on *Top Boy*, while not explicitly intersectional or focused solely on television, offers valuable insights into representations of Black working-class masculinity in urban spaces and social housing (see his article with Malik (2017), and 2023 book *Black Boys*).

The recent BAFTA 2024 discussion comparing *Happy Valley* and *Top Boy* further highlights the industry’s growing awareness of how class intersects with race and place in television drama. When *Top Boy* won the BAFTA for Best Drama series, there was reported dismay among critics and audiences. Tom Cotterill, writing in the *Daily Mail*, noted viewers’ ‘fury after “woke” judges pick *Top Boy* over *Happy Valley* for best drama series’ (Cotterill 2024), alongside a commentator for *The Guardian* noting that ‘there was huge expectation that shows depicting a mainstream (read: white) version of life, such as *Succession*, *The*

Crown and *Happy Valley* would sweep up’ (Addo 2024). Also writing for *The Guardian*, Stuart Heritage in his article entitled ‘The biggest mistakes from the 2024 TV Baftas’, noted ‘*Happy Valley* felt so far ahead of the pack that unanimous victory seemed certain [...] But [...] the best drama went to *Top Boy*, a show arguably best known for not being quite as good as *Happy Valley*’ (2024). In the *Daily Telegraph*, Gareth Roberts pointed toward class disparities between those empowered with creative control behind the scenes and those represented on-screen, writing ‘*Top Boy* is a great series. But, as ever, there’s something dizzying about high-end TV people and their peculiar obsession with the opposite corner of society. It’s all dressed up with social conscience and concern, but there’s a whiff of “slumming it”’ (2024).

Significantly, both *Happy Valley* and *Top Boy* depict working-class communities but in markedly different settings and with distinct racial demographics. *Happy Valley*, set in the predominantly white, post-industrial landscape of West Yorkshire, contrasts sharply with *Top Boy*’s portrayal of London’s multicultural urban estates. The criticism of *Top Boy*’s win reveals underlying biases in what is considered worthy of recognition in British television. While white working-class experiences were celebrated, the backlash against *Top Boy*’s win suggests a discomfort with or resistance to narratives that centre black working-class experiences.

Public opinion on Public Service Broadcasting: a mismatch of expectations

Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) are particularly important to the visibility of class in both academic and public understandings. Ofcom’s *Media Nations 2023: UK* found that ‘Despite the continuing decline of linear TV viewing, PSB channels still dominate the list of most watched programmes, especially when covering events of national significance such as high-profile sport, royal events and entertainment shows’ (Ofcom 2023:12). At the same time, ‘the

growth of SVoD household penetration slowed in 2022, and this continued into early 2023 as the rising cost of living, combined with SVoD service price rises, put greater strain on household budgets' (ibid.:15). These findings suggest that while streaming services have undoubtedly altered the television landscape, traditional PSB channels still hold a significant place in the viewing habits of UK audiences, particularly when it comes to events of national importance.

In December 2023, Ofcom published an analysis of audiences from socio-economic groups D and E – 'those with a lower socio-economic status and predominantly made up of those who are older, unemployed, have a disability, or are retired with only a state pension' (2023b: 4) – based on qualitative methods (interviews) about the BBC. The report highlights a misalignment between broadcasters' claims about their diversity strategies, people's lived experiences of class; and how they perceive themselves to be represented. Although the main focus of their research is on audiences' perceptions of on-screen representation, interviewees also expressed what they perceived to be a problem in the authoring, commissioning, and production of these programmes.

This problem deserves particular attention because of the broadcaster's remit and responsibility to represent and address the entirety of the national population. Specifically, the 2023 audience report shows that audiences in D and E groups were less satisfied across different criteria: representation of people and communities, impartiality, place, and lack of authenticity in portraying their lived experiences. More generally, audiences felt that, in terms of content, the BBC should take more risks and develop edgier, riskier, and more authentic material (ibid.: 3). Audiences perceived that the representation of the working class in BBC programmes (compared to other providers) lacks authenticity. The report's key findings state that 'the BBC's representation of D and E groups is felt to be out of touch, either misrepresenting or missing the mark' (ibid: 3), highlighting the need for more nuanced

and authentic portrayals of these socio-economic groups in BBC content. As the report states, ‘Participants believed that BBC content is made by people with very different lives and outlooks to them. Most perceived content to be made by older, middle class, White, and often male, creators’ (ibid.: 26).

Overall, this research suggests that the BBC is not effectively fulfilling its public purpose of representation and portrayal for working-class audiences. To provide an in-depth understanding of this mismatch between audiences’ perspectives and the work done by broadcasters, it is useful to examine how academic research and industry data depict the problem and identify gaps that might help develop new approaches to these issues.

Class and the television workforce

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) has played a crucial role in shaping policy recommendations for inclusive and sustainable growth in the UK's creative industries (Carey et al. 2020, 2021). Carey et al. (2021: 6) found that ‘61 per cent of those working in key creative roles were from privileged backgrounds’. Intersectionality is key here, as the authors found that ‘class interacts with other factors – such as gender, ethnicity, disability and skill levels – to create “double disadvantage”’ (Carey et al. 2020: 2). This multifaceted disadvantage compounds the challenges individuals from less privileged backgrounds face in entering and progressing within the creative industries.

Carey et al. (2021: 6) also show low levels of TV workers from working-class origins: ‘in 2020, only one in four of the UK Screen workforce came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, compared to 38 per cent of those across the economy’. This proportion has declined over time, with McAndrew et al. (2024) suggesting less than 10% of workers in film and TV occupations were from working-class origins.

Working with similar datasets to Carey et al. (2021), O'Brien et al. (2016), Oakley et al. (2017), and Brook et al. (2018) demonstrate that individuals from working-class origins face exclusion at every stage of their TV careers. Their research shows that middle-class backgrounds dominate leadership roles and labour market structures, such as networks and pay rates, which advantage those with economic and social resources. There is a stark disparity in access to creative occupations, finding that individuals from privileged backgrounds are more than twice as likely to secure jobs in these fields (Carey et al. 2021). Moreover, these individuals tend to dominate key creative roles, thereby influencing content across various media platforms, including stage, page, and screen. Thus, the experiences of working-class individuals are often misunderstood and misrepresented, even in interventions designed to support their careers (Hesmondhalgh 2017).

These statistics clearly illustrate the extent of class imbalances in the sector, particularly in key creative roles. While the PEC report offers a broad overview, Randle et al. (2015) delve deeper into the lived experiences of industry professionals. Although the study did not explicitly set out to investigate class, the authors found that ‘respondents often chose to use references to class in describing their experience’ (ibid.: 602). This finding underscores the salience of class in shaping individuals’ perceptions and experiences within the industry, complementing the statistical evidence provided by the PEC report. Similar themes, with a stress on the impact of social capital and connections, as well as the intersection of class and gender are present in Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012).

Social capital intersects with another way that class-based exclusion manifests: unpaid work (Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014). Their research suggests ‘a certain resignation on the part of younger workers to unpaid labour in the audio-visual industries, perhaps especially in the film industries, where notions of “sacrificial labour” might be more engrained’ (ibid.:

200). This acceptance of unpaid work disproportionately affects those from less privileged backgrounds, further entrenching the class imbalances identified in the PEC report.

Class also influences the television industry commissioning processes. Friedman and Laurison (2019) demonstrate that class dynamics extend beyond the ‘cultural match’ between commissioners and those pitching shows and series. Their research reveals that class significantly influences commissioners’ perceptions of what constitutes realistic representations of contemporary society and their understanding of potential audiences and markets.

The impact of class on commissioning practices has parallels in other areas of the television industry (Friedman et al. 2017). This body of work collectively underscores the pervasive influence of class across various facets of television production. By recognising these class-based dynamics in workforce composition, commissioning decisions, and creative processes, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how class shapes not only what we see on screen but also the structural conditions that determine which stories are told and by whom.

On screen representation

On-screen representation is covered by academic literature focusing on textual analysis, audience reception analysis of representation and portrayal, and some research on creative diversity. TV drama plays a significant role in the ‘strategic aspirations of broadcasters, independent production companies, and policy-makers, helping them to deliver on various economic, cultural, and political goals’ (McElroy and Noonan 2019). This genre can tell stories to a diverse range of viewers, support large production teams, be diverse in format, elastic in form, and allow for character development over multiple narrative arcs, assisting viewers to connect with issues and stories. Although drama is still bound up with what

Caughie (2000) determines as questions of repetition and difference, it offers a popular and important form of programming, framed as both culturally serious (ibid.) and popular (Fiske 1989).

Forrest and Johnson's 2017 edited collection on television and class moves beyond the reductive and often class-based hierarchies of 'good' and 'bad' television. It also transcends the binaries of heritage and realism, which have often been the primary lens through which British film and television representation is analysed (Sargeant 2000; Cooke 2015). The editors identify contemporary British television drama as 'a significant site for the formulation of class identity, "emphasising" an interest in the local, regional and historical' aspects of class representation (Forrest and Johnson 2017: 5).

Historically, dramatic genres such as the single play focused on social problems and incorporated working-class realism into their narratives. Indeed, the exploration of 'kitchen sink' social realism in British media, particularly in early TV plays, represents a significant chapter in the country's cultural history. As television became more prevalent in British homes, the BBC, operating under a public service mandate, recognised an opportunity to bring these narratives to a wider audience.

From 1970 to 1984, Play for Today (and its predecessor, The Wednesday Play) frequently featured stories exploring working-class life, albeit from a middle-class perspective (Hutchings 2009). These plays were crucial in fulfilling the BBC's mandate to inform, educate, and entertain, bringing socially relevant drama to a mass audience, tackling controversial subjects, and pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable on television.

A recurring theme in many of these plays was portraying class as a constraining force that characters sought to escape. This manifested in various ways: working-class characters striving for better education or jobs, younger generations rejecting their parents' values, and individuals grappling with the tension between community ties and personal advancement.

Notable examples like Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (1966) tackled issues such as homelessness, poverty, and the impact of public spending cuts on working-class families (Lacey 2010). In doing so, these productions sparked nationwide conversations about class, social mobility, and the welfare state in Britain (MacMurrough-Kavanagh 1997; Caughie 1991; Cooke 2003).

In recent years, numerous television dramas have garnered significant scholarly attention for their nuanced portrayal of class-based dimensions. A prominent example is *Shameless*, which has been extensively analysed by various scholars (Munt 2008; Baker 2009; Creeber 2009; Johnson 2012, 2013, 2016). Baker (2009: 454) posits that the series employs 'genre to define its representation of a post-industrial working class', particularly through what Creeber (2009) terms 'social surrealism'. British youth-oriented dramas, such as *Misfits* and *Skins* (Woods 2016), have adopted this stylistic approach, further exemplifying the pervasiveness of class-based narratives in contemporary television (see the section 'Where are we now? Class on TV in the 2020s' for more on youth TV).

Concurrently, heritage and costume dramas are pivotal genres for examining the dynamics of class. Leggott and Taddeo (2014: xix) argue that 'TV costume drama [...] can provide a lens through which to examine the class and gender politics of both the past and the present'. This perspective is further reinforced by Sables (2017: 1001), who notes that 'aristocracy is reinforced by the active association of the heritage sites with British television dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, *The Forsythe Saga*, and *Selfridges*'. Among these, *Downton Abbey* has attracted extensive scholarly discourse in recent years (Chapman 2014; Byrne 2013; Stoddart 2018), cementing its status as a significant text in examining class representation in period dramas. These genres are often discussed in terms of whether they romanticise or critique historical class divisions and social hierarchies via narrative and mise-

en-scène, but more recently, for what they communicate ‘about the cultural appetites of the present’ (Byrne 2013: 326).

‘Social issue’ dramas have also played an incisive role in highlighting the class location of ‘real-life’, dramatised events on contemporary television and in contemporary culture. As Lesley Henderson writes of social issue television dramas in particular, these stories are frequently culturally charged and ‘reveal and embody wider questions concerning media power and society’ (2007: 5). Citing James Curran (1991), Henderson reflects on the ‘democratic functioning’ of the media, highlighting affordances of the overlap between ‘public knowledge’ and ‘popular culture’ projects, to recognise the value of ‘analysing television fiction not simply as a site of pleasure but also as a site of definitional power’ (2007: 8).

Social issue dramas tend toward representations that align with repertoires of television social realism, including domestic, familial dynamics and settings and familiar iconography of ‘that long shot of our town from that hill’ (John Krish, quoted in Shields 1991: 216), alongside what Helen Wood (2020) refers to as their more contemporary extension through cinematographic and aesthetic conventions such as ‘the use of time-lapse views of the town, the casting of important working-class actors [...], and the powerful performance of class vernacular at key moments of antagonism’ (2020: 71). As Beverly Skeggs argues, in the process of class-making, ‘essentialising and spatializing work together’ (2004:19).

The three-part drama *Three Girls* (BBC One, 2017) and the two-part drama, *The Moorside* (BBC One, 2017) stand as examples of social issue dramas that have been understood in this way. Representing the Rochdale child sex-grooming gang scandal of 2011 and the 2008 case of the ‘disappearance’ of Shannon Matthews, a nine-year-old schoolgirl from Dewsbury in West Yorkshire, analysis of these dramas by Wood (2020), and Forrest

and Johnson (2020) respectively, have afforded deeper understanding of both the complexities of ‘recognising alternative classed subjectivities on television’ (Wood 2020: 70), and of ‘the formation of pervasive and corrosive narratives of ‘broken Britain’, by rendering them through highly constructed and reductive frameworks of class, place, gender and race’ (Forrest and Johnson 2020: 91). Both studies also reflect on the ways in which these dramas work to eschew and even erase intersectional representations of class within the communities that they depict.

Where are we now? Class on TV in the 2020s

Considering television more broadly, in the 2020s, a significant shift in the UK TV landscape has been the emergence of comedies created by working-class women on the BBC and Channel 4 (Minor 2023, 2024). This wave of comedy, including *This Country* (BBC Three, 2017–20), *In My Skin* (BBC Three, 2018–21), *Derry Girls* (Channel 4, 2018–22), *Hullraisers* (Channel 4, 2022–), and *The Change* (BBC Three, 2024–), reflect the evolving face of British television.

Equally important are the comedies that are intersectionally informed and, more specifically, address classed articulations of Black Britishness. BBC Three has been a platform for two significant series in this regard. Adjani Salmon's *Dreaming Whilst Black* (BBC Three, 2023–) follows a working-class Black Jamaican protagonist navigating the world of London's middle-class creatives as they try to become a filmmaker. Alongside this, Daniel Lawrence Taylor's comedy-drama *Boarders* (BBC Three, 2024–) tells the story of five Black teens from inner-city London who secure scholarships to an elite boarding school. Both series delve into systemic issues related to race and class, with a particular focus on unequal access to education and a critique of EDI interventions (Ahmed 2012).

Boarders can also be seen as what Faye Woods refers to as ‘British youth television’ (2017). Series falling under this category reflect British programming’s embrace of both teens and twentysomethings, with a quest for ‘authenticity’ as a central thread across different genres. Most importantly, for the purposes of this article, Woods argues that the work of public service broadcasters and representations of class are crucial components in its cultural representations (ibid.: 8-9). *Waterloo Road* (BBC One/Three, 2006-), which the BBC recommissioned in 2022, is a further example of this. A writer for the show, Liz Lake, has stated that ‘*Waterloo Road* was conceived as a campaigning show with social realism in its DNA’ (Youngs 2023), reflecting the BBC’s commitment to representing the diversity of British society (BBC 2016).

New commissions in the 2020s include series such as *Phoenix Rise* (BBC Three, 2023-), about a group of Midlands (Coventry) teens who have been excluded from school as they return to mainstream education. For creators Matt Evans and Alex Tenenbaum, the ‘class element was huge [...]. We felt that these kinds of children are not represented [on TV] and, if they are, it's not very authentically’ (quoted in Bell 2023). To ensure this was the case, the pair ensured that all ‘35 principal roles were cast from the Midlands, with many from Coventry itself’ (ibid.).

With a similar interest in regionality and class, brothers Paul and Michael Clarkson created the BBC Three ‘youth’ horror drama *Red Rose* (BBC Three/Netflix, 2022) in their hometown of Bolton. Both have said that ‘[g]rowing up working class, we viewed it as a positive and we love having a working-class view on the world [...] With *Red Rose*, we’re hoping people who are watching it that are working class will feel proud of where they’re from’ (Day 2022). Importantly, with these newly commissioned series, the creators/writers have personal connections to the communities they depict, reflecting a growing emphasis on ‘authentic’ representation in English, if not British television.

Alongside comedy TV and British ‘youth’ television, factual programming has been integral to the representation of social class on PSBs. Significantly, while the documentary series *Benefits Street* (2014) on Channel 4 initially came to typify the so-called ‘underclass’ in the 2010s, there have been regional reality shows, such as *Brickies* (2022-) and *Angels of the North* (2019-) on BBC Three, that focus on the petit-bourgeoisie in the late 2010s and early 2020s. In contrast to *Benefits Street*, *Brickies* and *Angels of the North* represent a new wave of regional reality shows that aim to showcase the aspirations and experiences of young people.

This change reflects a broader societal discourse around social mobility and the so-called ‘muddle class’ or ‘old petit bourgeoisie’ (Evans 2023). Both *Brickies* and *Angels of the North* focus on this ‘old petit-bourgeoisie’ in specific trades or industries, such as bricklaying and hair styling, highlighting their efforts to build careers in contemporary Britain. As the tagline for *Brickies* states, ‘[t]he bricklayers are building their lives brick by brick’. This focus on work ethic – something also highly prominent within the television industry – demonstrates how an emphasis on individual success stories obscures the broader structural inequalities that continue to shape opportunities for many in British society (Littler 2017).

In the aftermath of the financial crisis and the ensuing years of austerity, as well as the long-term effects of neoliberalism, which has caused large-scale de-industrialisation and the global outsourcing of labour (Harvey 2005), the ‘hard graft’ of builders and service work of hairdressers is portrayed as a means to achieve social mobility and stability. This narrative is one that is increasingly present in the television industry and the wider cultural industries, which, as David Lee argues, are ‘focused on entertainment rather than education, individualism rather than social structure, and personal transformation rather than social transformation’ (2018: 169).

Although comedy, youth-oriented television, and reality TV explicitly address issues around social class, the role of drama in exploring these topics is less clear, partly due to the broadness of the genre itself. Still, in the 2020s, numerous dramas have explored different avenues pertaining to social class, and we have identified four types of TV series that do so on the BBC and Channel 4. First, there are TV shows focusing on class inequalities and social mobility in institutions and workplaces, including *Industry* (BBC/HBO, 2020–), *This is Going to Hurt* (BBC One, 2022), *Boiling Point* (BBC One, 2023), *Time* (BBC One, 2021–), and *Screw* (Channel 4, 2022–23).

These series explore how class intersects with other forms of inequality to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities within various professional contexts (Friedman and Laurison 2019). Though facing criticism for their own workplace cultures and lack of diversity (see, for instance, Malik and Shankley 2020; Marsden et al. 2022), Channel 4 and the BBC are using their platforms to spark conversations about class, inequality, and social mobility.

The second type of TV series typically revolves around working-class people resisting dominant narratives about their lives and challenging classed stereotypes. An example is *This Town* (BBC One, 2024), which follows a family and a group of young people in the early 1980s in the West Midlands (Coventry and Birmingham) drawn to the two-tone and ska music scene. The creator of the show, Steven Knight, has said that they are 'proud to be working class' and wanted to depict working-class life 'without any sense of sorrow or pity' (BBC Media Centre 2024), much like the comedies and British youth TV explored earlier.

The Way (BBC One, 2024) is another TV series focusing on the working class. It follows a breakdown in relations between employees and management at the Port Talbot Steelworks and, subsequently, how a family moves to the UK after anti-Welsh civil conflict. The series explores the long-term impact of deindustrialisation on working-class communities

and the continued struggle for workers' rights in the face of globalisation and corporate greed.

Alongside these new offerings has been Jimmy McGovern's recommissioned anthology drama series *Moving On* (BBC One, 2009–). McGovern has had an enduring relationship with the BBC. He started working with them in the 1980s, writing for shows like *Broken Voices* (BBC Two, 1988), before creating shows for ITV, such as *Cracker* (ITV, 1993–2006) and *Hillsborough* (ITV, 1996). Then, in the 2000s onwards, McGovern moved back to the BBC with series such as *The Street* (BBC One, 2006–9), *Accused* (BBC One, 2010–12), and *Moving On*. Significantly, all of these series are known for their social realist style and for tackling difficult issues (Cooke 2003; Paget 2011).

Third, there are television dramas that both normalise middle-upper-class representations and showcase their precarity and vulnerability. For instance, writer of *The Split* (BBC One, 2018–2022), Abi Morgan, is conscious of the show being middle class, stating that 'it's a large part of our audience and I hope it's a show that pulls people in despite the fact that the characters live in beautiful houses and have nice lives' (Hughes: 2018). In the TV drama *Wolf* (BBC One, 2023), meanwhile, a wealthy family find themselves terrorised by a psychopath's cruel games in their isolated home in Monmouthshire, highlighting the fragility of privilege and the illusion of security that wealth provides.

Finally, there are dramas that are intersectionally informed, specifically in terms of class and other social strata (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2019). For instance, *Champion* (BBC One/Netflix, 2023), set in South London, focuses on the musical rivalry between two up-and-coming musicians who are also siblings, Bosco and Vita Champion. Though social class is not at the forefront of the series, it comments on race/class as, in the show, much like in *Dreaming Whilst Black*, 'white middle-class industry execs [are] trying to monetise their black client's notoriety' (Einav 2023), reflecting the exploitation and appropriation of black

culture by the white middle-class (Saha 2018). *The Way*, though focused on working-class representation in terms of Welsh trade unionists, also critiques refugee policies and the scapegoating of immigrants for economic woes, highlighting the intersections between class, race, and nationality in shaping the series.

While televisual authenticity is increasingly tethered to place, it is important to recognise that the majority of the shows above are English rather than British. Though *Derry Girls* stands as a rare example of a Northern Ireland set serial, dissatisfaction with regard to Made Outside of England (MoE) quotas, and specifically Ofcom's recent reconsideration of C4s nations quotas, led to PACT – the UK screen sector trade body for independent production and distribution companies – publicly expressing its 'disappointment'. 'Ofcom', it noted, 'has failed to consider the regulatory changes brought about in the Media Act, which will affect the way in which Channel 4 can operate, and that separate nations quotas have been rejected by both Ofcom and Channel 4' (PACT 2024).

Acting against collective campaigning from Northern Ireland Screen and counterparts in Scotland and Wales for C4's nations quota to be raised to 16%, with individual quotas for each nation based on population, Ofcom's decision was reported in *Broadcast* as an 'excoriation' of Ofcom by Marian McHugh, who further reported that 'NI Screen lambasted Ofcom's assertion that an individual nations quota would not serve audience interests, pointing to the success of *Derry Girls* the only Northern Ireland project of scale on Channel 4 during the license period'"(2024).

Conclusion

This is an especially challenging time for Screen industries. As a key part of the sector, television is on the frontline of some of the most difficult circumstances in living memory. The list of issues is long and extensive. They form a context whereby the UK is investing in

and supporting ‘high end’ programming and production facilities at a point of genuine crisis for the existing and future workforce. Much of the Screen sector saw a recovery in the immediate months following the halt to production during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hermes and Hill 2020). Indeed, much of the world turned on their televisions to make it through lockdowns (Johnson and Dempsey 2024). This moment of possible optimism observed longstanding inequalities within the workforce and issues associated with working conditions. These problems have been exacerbated in the months and years since.

The industry faces crises associated with PSB’s sustainability and funding models, a decline in inward investment in UK film and HETV production, a significant rise in production costs, a reduction in available advertising revenue, and a substantive slowdown in commissioning and employment following (but not wholly attributable to) the Hollywood labour disputes of 2023/4. This context has seen the cancellation of crucial ‘entry route’ (van Raalte et al. 2024) TV shows such as *Doctors* (Brennan and Newsinger 2024). Both the Film and TV Charity (2022) and Bectu (2024) have sounded the alarm about the impact on the workforce.

The broader UK policy context is shifting too. BBC Charter renewal will take place in 2027 under an administration much less formally hostile to both the BBC institution and the licence fee as a method for funding. While important questions have been raised about the regulation of PSB and potential bias within the regulatory body, Ofcom (Hughes 2024), policy will also be impacted by the 2024 Media Act, which is likely to see the world of streaming subject to the same scrutiny of concerning workforce and representation that has impacted linear broadcasting. Such policy change was needed following the substantive digital transformation of the media landscape over the last ten years, both in terms of

audience behaviours and in terms of the media's political economy (Martin and Johnson 2024).

This complex landscape forms the backdrop for our examination of class representation in television. Recent political developments have added new urgency to this issue. The Labour Party's 2024 manifesto pledged to enact the 'socio-economic duty' outlined in the 2010 Equality Act. While this will not elevate social class to the same legal status as protected characteristics like gender, it signals a renewed focus on class inequalities. Indeed, ministerial speeches and statements, along with Labour's 'Opportunity' mission for government, have reinforced the early impression that social class will matter.

What class means in the context of this policy setting, as our article has reflected upon, is currently in flux. Reflecting on the evolution of class in UK television, we can see how industrial practices have shaped our ability to 'see' class in particular ways while obscuring others. The television industry's approach to class has been largely shaped by its own structures and biases. Longstanding traditions, from the Reithian mission to 'educate, inform, and entertain' to the more recent push for 'creative diversity', have often been filtered through middle-class and/or neoliberal frameworks. This has resulted in a selective visibility of working-class experiences. Shows like *Top Boy*, *Happy Valley*, and *Brickies*, while bringing working-class stories to the forefront, also reveal the industry's tendencies to frame these narratives within certain expectations and genres. Even where intersectionality is present, the expectations and genre conventions that frame class show the limits of 'creative diversity' policies (Malik 2013; Cobb et al. 2020; Edwards and Moss 2024).

This framing paradoxically acknowledges and denies class presence. While working-class characters and stories are more visible than ever, the structural issues that shape class experiences – both in society and in the television industry – often remain unaddressed. This

selective visibility can create an illusion of representation that masks the widening social inequality in broader society.

Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach. It is not enough to simply increase the number of working-class characters on screen or even to hire more working-class individuals in entry-level positions. The industry needs to critically examine its structures, from commissioning processes to career progression pathways, to ensure that working-class people are seen and heard at all levels of production. There must be an engagement with the structural aspects of class rather than focusing solely on individual narratives.

Crucially, our examination of class in television studies has highlighted the importance of intersectionality. Class does not exist in isolation but intersects with other identity markers such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, and regional identity. This intersectional approach has revealed how different forms of marginalisation can compound and create unique experiences of disadvantage or privilege within the television industry and in on-screen representations.

Looking forward, we suggest that television scholars should focus on several key areas: 1) Developing more nuanced methodologies for analysing intersectional representations of class; 2) Investigating the impact of streaming platforms and changing viewing habits on class representation and audience reception; 3) Examining the long-term effects of diversity initiatives on class inclusion in the television industry; and 4) Exploring how evolving definitions of class in contemporary Britain are reflected in and shaped by television content.

More specifically, there is a need for in-depth ethnographic studies of how class dynamics play out in the day-to-day production process. These studies should examine how class backgrounds influence creative decisions, workplace cultures, and power dynamics on set. This approach could be complemented by longitudinal studies tracking the career paths of

television professionals from different class backgrounds, providing insights into how class impacts long-term success in the industry. Additionally, more research is needed on how intersectional identities impact career trajectories and creative opportunities in the television industry, offering a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between class and other social factors.

Regarding audience reception and engagement, there's room for more contemporary research on how viewers from different backgrounds interpret and engage with class representations on television. This could involve comparative studies across different socioeconomic groups, potentially revealing how class positions influence media interpretation and engagement. Such audience studies should also consider the impact of digital platforms and user-generated content on class representation and access to media production, reflecting the changing landscape of television consumption and creation.

Finally, to provide a broader perspective, large-scale quantitative studies of class representation across different genres and channels could complement the qualitative analyses that currently dominate the field. These have the potential to offer a more comprehensive view of class representation trends across the television landscape. Relatedly, there could be more in-depth analysis of how media policy and regulation impact class representation and workforce diversity, connecting industry practices with broader societal and political contexts.

As class continues to shape both the stories on our screens and the structures behind them, the challenge for television scholars and industry professionals alike is to move beyond considerations of mere visibility (though this is certainly a start), towards evidence-led, intersectionally attendant, structural change.

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