Book Review: Class and Contemporary British Culture

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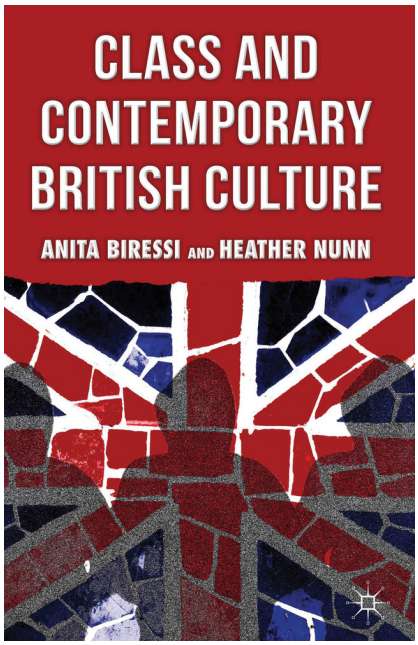
How does culture articulate, frame, organise and produce stories about social class and class difference? What do these stories tell us about contemporary models of success, failure, struggle and aspiration? Drawing on examples from the 1980s to the present day this book investigates the changing landscape of class and reveals how it has become populated by a host of classed figures including the Essex Girl, the 'squeezed middle', the 'feral underclass', the 'selfish baby boomers' and others. ***Steven Harkins*** *finds one of the most concise, well written and researched overviews of the 'underclass' available in scholarly literature.*

Class and Contemporary British Culture. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn. Palgrave Macmillan. April 2013.



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A renewed focus on social class has been one of the features of contemporary political debates in Britain since the financial crash of 2008. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn's new book *Class and Contemporary British Culture* makes a well-researched contribution to the topic. The book is described by the authors as 'an account of the haves and have-nots' in contemporary British society. This review focuses on two chapters that examine the inhabitants of two poles at the farthest extremes of the British class system. Chapter 3 of this study examines the 'revolting underclass' and chapter 6 looks at the 'upper classes' and these chapters are the focus of this review.

The aftermath of the 2011 London Riots saw the resurrection of 'underclass' discourses from Conservative politicians like Michael Gove, Ken Clarke and Iain Duncan Smith. Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, linked the growth of an 'underclass' to Britain's 'corrosive welfare system'. Social critics from the left also accepted this terminology with Naomi Klein linking the riots to the growth of a 'ballooning underclass'. This study also examines racial explanations for the existence of an 'underclass' by pointing to a David Goodhart article for *Prospect Magazine*, where he argued that 'underclass attitudes have emerged and hardened via an Anglo-Jamaican tragedy'. Biressi and Nunn argue that historian David Starkey represented a 'small minority' who argued on *Newsnight* that 'black culture had somehow contaminated a white probably underclass population'.

Biressi and Nunn's examination of the riots provides the jumping off point for a comprehensive review of scholarly literature on the topic of the 'underclass'. The review traces the usage of 'underclass' terminology in the 1980s when it was used by journalists and policymakers to resurrect Victorian discourses of social Darwinism. The existence of an 'underclass' was linked to social degeneration, most notably articulated by Keith Joseph who argued in 1974 that their existence meant that 'our human stock is threatened'. Throughout this period the theory of the 'underclass' focused on the 'trans-generational transmission of social dysfunction'. In the New Labour era of the late 1990s, 'underclass' terminology was replaced by discourses of 'social exclusion'. However, in policy terms the Labour government 'sought to attack welfare dependency' which they linked to 'moral deficiencies'. This period also saw the implementation of 'zero tolerance measures against homeless people, who allegedly represented a public protection issue due to their tendency towards criminality'.

The criminalisation of poor people was to become a feature of the neoliberal-era as Biressi and Nunn observe:

'…if the neoliberal context of the marketised society one of lifestyle choice sustained through consumerism then the welfare participant, the irredeemably poor and the "fatalistic" underclass all become an offence and a near-outrageous contravention of the prevailing social ideal. In a society of consumers "they are people with no market value…they are *failed consumers*"'.

This chapter provides the best overviews of the 'underclass' available, although a few features could have been developed more fully. Early discourses of the 'underclass' in the United States focused heavily on race and this is only fleetingly referenced in this chapter through the work of Ken Auletta. This feature deserves more attention, especially considering Charles Murray's previous work on race and his role in propagating the 'underclass' theory in the British media. The other feature missing from this study is the role played by conservative think tanks in promoting the idea of the 'underclass' which is almost exclusively linked to the issue of welfare reform. For example Charles Murray's work was funded and promoted in the U.S. by the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute, and in the UK by the Institute for Economic Affairs. There are two clear reasons for the promotion of this idea by conservative foundations: firstly they justify welfare cuts because welfare is seen as funding the 'lifestyle choices' of the 'underclass'; and secondly they justify the privatisation of state welfare systems through workfare schemes. U.S. journalist Thomas Frank describes the privatisation of the welfare state as the 'shimmering dream' of Conservatives. The 'underclass' concept is regularly promoted by elite interests and it has been described by Bagguley and Mann as '*the* ideology of the upper class' who are the subject of the next chapter in this review.

Chapter 6 of this study focuses on the 'upper classes' and the most striking thing about this chapter is how little is known about the people who occupy the upper echelons of British society. This chapter describes how 'the upper classes (such as financiers, bankers and captains of industry) are largely invisible unless they choose not to be'. The chapter focuses on the monarchy and the aristocracy, and is the weakest chapter in the book. The central argument of this chapter is that 'in these times of austerity it is the middle and upper classes who have been approved to train, educate and guide us in life skills and personal values'. The evidence for this claim is the spate of reality television programmes like *From Ladette to Lady* (ITV 2005-2010) which take George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* as a 'source of inspiration'. A series of similar examples are produced where '"experts", often from very privileged and even aristocratic backgrounds, work to instruct others in the attainment of social skills, self-presentation, diet and lifestyle'.

This review of the upper classes seems superficial compared to some of the excellent and in depth research contained throughout the rest of the book. The seminal work of Texan sociologist C. Wright-Mills in studying elites provides a far more in-depth way of studying the 'upper classes' in society. In 2006 Hywel Williams used Mills' intellectual framework to produce a study of *Britain's Power Elites* which focused on political, professional and financial elites and provided a more convincing account of Britain's upper classes than Biressi and Nunn's chapter on the subject. Despite these shortcomings, the chapter does provide an interesting discussion on the reflection of 'upper class' values in the British media which constructs a reality where 'social inequalities seem to be smoothed over with good intentions'.

This book examines a range of issues relating to British culture and class with chapters focusing on social mobility, the underclass, education, celebrity culture, the upper classes, immigration and austerity. The chapter on the 'revolting underclass' is one of the most concise, well written and researched overviews of the 'underclass' available in scholarly literature although more attention could have been paid to racialized constructions of the 'underclass' in the U.S. and the role played by conservative think-tanks in promoting the theory. The chapter on the upper classes offers an interesting critique of media values however it does feel slightly superficial and could have been improved by examining the upper class through the conceptual lens of elite studies.

Steven Harkins is an ESRC funded PhD candidate based in the in the Journalism Studies Department at the University of Sheffield. He is also a tutor and occasional lecturer in the same department. His PhD research focuses on reporting poverty and inequality in the UK press with a particular emphasis on the relationship between journalists and their sources. He holds a BA (Hons) in Journalism and Politics from the University of Stirling and an MSc with distinction in Media and Communication research from the University of Strathclyde. Read more reviews by Steven.