

Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class

Chavs, written more than five years ago, is a polemic about a society that was unnecessarily unjust, cruel, divided; since its original publication in 2011 Britain has only become more unjust, cruel and divided.

The book appeared in print less than twelve months after the Conservatives returned to Downing Street, after thirteen years in the political wilderness, and it had three central purposes: to refute the myth that Britain is a classless society, when in fact huge amounts of wealth and power are concentrated in very few hands; to tackle the poisonous mantra that social problems like poverty are actually individual failings; and to encourage the idea that social progress comes about by people with similar economic interests organizing together to change society.

In the 1980s, Thatcherism remodelled British society. Since 2010, the Tory government has busied itself with an ambitious project for rolling back the state in an effort to complete Thatcher's work. On the one hand, for the sorts of people who tend to fund the Conservative Party - not least those in the financial sector that plunged Britain into an economic mire - the last few years have been a boomtime.

During one of the great economic traumas of modern British history, the fortunes of the wealthiest 1000 Britons more than doubled. On the other, the plight of working people stands in stark contrast. Workers suffered the longest fall in pay packets since the 1870s. And then there was the hunger.

Britain is one of the richest societies ever to exist and yet hundreds of thousands of Britons depend on food banks for their meals. A central plank of the government's programme was to reduce the welfare state. In order to justify this, a campaign of myths, distortion and demonization was employed.

The nation's finances were out of control, said the government, blaming excessive Labour spending on schools and hospitals during the 1990s. Here was a deliberately misleading conflation of spending in different branches of government to create one single image of desperation.

In fact most of the money within the welfare budget goes on pensioners who have paid in all their lives; and, indeed, the government was quick to assure voters that their pensions and entitlements would be protected.

In contrast, the amount spent on unemployed people is only a relatively small fraction of social security spending. yet this group took a disproportionate amount of the blame for the welfare crisis. Support for the government's efforts to cut back on spending depended on portraying the recipients of social security as workshy, feckless freeloaders.

It required the ruthless and unapologetic application of the politics of envy to hammer its point home. Low-paid workers faced having their in-work benefits slashed and were getting wages that could in no way sustain a comfortable existence.

But when they should have directed their ire at the government or their employers, they were encouraged to resent the unemployed people supposedly living it up at their expense. Since the 2008 crisis, rather than helping the poor, Tory ministers have openly condemned them as 'skivers' and 'shirkers' to exploit divisions within the working class.

In the House of Commons, David Cameron announced, "We back the workers, they back the shirkers." The Chancellor, George Osborne, asked, "Where is the fairness... for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next-door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?"

Demonization has become an ever more powerful instrument of divide-and-rule. Government attempts to stir up resentment against benefit claimants targeted in particular those low-paid workers who were struggling in large part because of coalition policies.

This was calculated to reinforce the myth that benefit claimants were often better off than those sloggng their guts out at work. To drive this message home, at the beginning of 2013, the coalition unveiled the Welfare Benefits Uprating Bill, a piece of legislation that imposed a real-terms cut in benefits.

This was British politics at its most base and cynical. For the first time since 1931, a government was intentionally slashing the incomes of the poor. Charities projected that hundreds of thousands of children would be driven into poverty as a result.

Throughout the Parliamentary debate, Tory MPs - many of whom were millionaires - jeered and guffawed as they prepared to plunge people they would never meet below the poverty line. "TODAY LABOUR ARE VOTING TO INCREASE BENEFITS BY MORE THAN WORKERS' WAGES", claimed a Tory poster.

But in actual fact the majority of those affected were in working households. Low-paid workers faced a double whammy of real-terms pay cuts and reduced tax credits thanks to the Tory government, too. Worker and unemployed alike were being mugged.

The so-called bedroom tax was another example. In this proposed legislation social tenants deemed to have a 'spare bedroom' would suffer a cut in their housing benefit, forcing them to pay more to stay in their own homes.

These were disproportionately people living in poverty with little money to spare; it was estimated that two-thirds of households affected had disabled residents. So-called spare bedrooms were often rooms for carers, or customized for disabilities.

If bedroom-tax victims wished to avoid losing money, they had to downsize properties: but with a national shortage of one-bedroom social houses, this was simply not a feasible proposition for most people.

In other words, those living in overcrowded homes, or trapped on a 5-million-strong social housing waiting list, were encouraged to resent disabled people with a little extra living space rather than attack the government for failing to build enough homes.

At the same time, work assessments of disabled people were drastically expanded under the Cameron government. This process of testing people to see if they are able to work was initially overseen by the French corporation Atos, and led to many sick and disabled people being deemed fit for work and having their benefits taken away.

Journalists and politicians vilified those put-upon individuals, suggesting that they were falsely claiming disability payments, and this had very real consequences. In the years of the Cameron era, disability charities warned that media and political rhetoric had driven a disturbing jump in the abuse of disabled people.

The mental health charity, Scope, for example, found that two-thirds of disabled people reported abuse in September 2011, a jump from 41 percent just a few months before.

It was not just politicians and newspapers, who began to attack the poor. In an atmosphere of near hysteria, television producers wanted a piece of the action too. Channel 4 announced that they were to broadcast *Skint*, described as an observational documentary focusing on a community in Scunthorpe hammered by de-industrialization.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

When the show materialized however, it foregrounded chaotic life-styles and larger-than-life caricatures for viewers' voyeuristic pleasure. In similar fashion, another Channel 4 programme, *Benefits Street*, hunted down unsympathetic benefit claimants on a street near Birmingham.

The audience's reaction triggered a wave of demands on social media for the participants to be hanged or gassed. These are programmes that aimed to turn the poor against the poor, commissioned and produced by the privileged.

Then there was BBC 3's *People Like Us*, a show revolving around an estate in Harphurhey, Manchester, which had the same approach. Local residents staged a furious meeting, attacking a "biased and distorted" view of the community, and a local council worker, Richard Searle, whose daughter appeared in the programme, argued that "the BBC should not be propagating this harmful and misleading image of the working class".

Channel 5 staged a three-part series focusing on criminal behaviour: *Shoplifters and Proud*, *Pick Pockets and Proud*, and finally, *On Benefits and Proud*. Again, the focus was on extreme examples of the socially excluded, particularly from unusually large families, like Heather Frost's, a woman with eleven children who had already been widely featured in the mainstream media.

Many of these programmes barely gestured toward objectivity or accuracy. Take *The Future of the Welfare State*, presented by veteran BBC interviewer John Humphreys, which claimed that Britain was living in an 'age of entitlement'.

The programme was later found by the BBC Trust to have violated impartiality and accuracy rules. This out-and-out propaganda relied on the usual box of tricks: unearthing extreme examples, relying on interviews from biased sources, and not backing up audacious claims with statistics or facts.

The Trust ruled that the programme left viewers 'unable to reach an informed opinion'. Another line of attack was to encourage private sector workers to turn on public sector workers. In this way real-terms government cuts to public sector pay were justified in the light of the cuts private sector workers had suffered.

Attacks on public sector pensions were defended on the basis that private sector pensions had been ravaged. Indeed, private sector pensions had been decimated, but that was the fault of private sector bosses, not dinner ladies and bin-collectors.

Throughout the 1990s, for example, companies save 18 billion pounds in pension holidays even as their workers continued to contribute. Rather than turn on the boss, the shelf-stacker and call centre worker, encouraged by the government and media, turned instead on the nurse and the teacher whose pension was intact.

'Trade unions say they will fight to oppose public sector pensions cuts', wrote the Telegraph's Ian Cowie, 'but they had better beware they can expect little support from the public because most savers outside these schemes can only dream of having such problems'.

The irony is that one of the staple arguments of the right against those wanting the richest to pay more tax is that they are guilty of the 'politics of envy'. During the 2015 general election campaign, the Tories pledged to slash 12 billion pounds from social security spending but, when pressed, refused to say where the axe would fall.

When asked on national television whether spending on tax credits would be reduced, David Cameron firmly denied it, responding, "It's going to fall". When the Conservatives won a surprise victory in 2015, Cameron's assertion turned out to be untrue.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Cuts to tax credits would leave over 3 million working families poorer by an average of around 1,350 pounds a year; millions of other working families would lose out, too.

The government trumpeted a rise in the minimum wage to £9 an hour as a 'living wage'; it was nothing of the sort, even ignoring the fact that the living wage is calculated partly on the basis of what tax credits people were eligible to receive.

It is notable how these policies were defended. The idea that the poor are breeding too fast, and being incentivised to do so, is age-old: Britain's Poor Law prior to 1834 was assailed by its critics on this basis, too.

And this was the rationale behind restricting tax credits to two children: to tap into the idea that low-paid workers were encouraged by the state to have larger families. Here was an outright attempt to demonize working benefit claimants in a way that was already all too common for unemployed benefit claimants.

Part of the rationale was that low-paid workers simply had to work harder. Tory Cabinet minister Jeremy Hunt announced that cutting tax credits conveyed an 'important cultural signal' about the importance of hard work, and would mean British workers would have to work as hard as their Chinese counterparts.

This was a continuing conservative theme. The Conservative Cabinet minister Liz Truss, for example, was among five Tory MPs who contributed to a book condemning British workers as 'among the worst idlers in the world', suggesting that 'too many people in Britain prefer a lie-in to hard work'.

If the Conservatives wished to decrease spending on tax credits and other in-work benefits without reducing the incomes of working people, they simply needed to raise wages. But the expansion of lowpaid work in Britain has driven a rise in social security spending: indeed, tax credit expenditure rose during the first Conservative term beyond initial estimates because so many were forced to take up low paid jobs.

The Tory argument was that work was the route out of poverty, but with more than 5 million British workers paid less than a living wage and with most people in poverty in work, this was nonsensical. The man in charge of driving through social security changes was Iain Duncan Smith; in his constituency, Chingford and Woodford, 48.3 percent of workers are paid less than a living wage, the fifth highest proportion of any constituency in Britain.

There is so much more about class to discuss. What could be described as the working class has never been homogenous. It includes people for whom life is very difficult, who are struggling for a secure, let alone comfortable, existence; and it includes people for whom life is OK, but could be so much better, and who face rising insecurity and fears about the future of their children.

For those of us who aspire to transform society, we must build a coalition including both groups: for both low-income and middle-income, for those languishing in poverty and for those working in an office on £28,000 a year, for those who call themselves 'working class' and those who self-identify as 'middle class'.

That means examining how class is evolving. It is projected that there will soon be more self-employed people than public sector workers: around one in seven workers are now self-employed. Many of them value their independence, and who can blame them, particularly in a country where power is intensely concentrated in the hands of bosses rather than workers.

But many resent the insecurity: they often lack paid sick leave and maternity leave; the tax credits many receive are being cut; they find getting loans from banks difficult; they are frequently turned down for mortgages; they spend too much time chasing invoices for work they have completed and so on.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Here are issues that must surely be championed by those who wish to transform society. In much of the Cameron era, the posture of the left has been 'anti-austerity' - that is, a defensive approach. 'Austerity' is a term that means little to many people.

A coherent industrial strategy to create thriving renewable energy and hi-tech industries, creating skilled secure jobs; public investment banks to help rebalance the economy; democratizing the economy; a just tax system; making the case for trade unions in raising both wages and productivity; here, surely, are the approaches that desperately need to be developed, and translated into a language that most people can understand.

Injustice of ten seems daunting and difficult to overcome; but history tells us that what seem like insurmountable odds can be overcome. It is profoundly irrational for so much wealth and power to be concentrated in so few hands.

Such a divided society is the source of needless insecurity, hardship and stress; of dreams that are never realized; of futures that are vandalized. All this injustice can be overcome. But as injustice is a collective problem, it requires a collective solution: people must realize that, although they may have their differences, the differences between them are far less significant than those that separate them from power; and that if they organize together, their collective power can transform society.

It is easier to write about this than achieve it. Nonetheless, it remains true that as our ancestors overcame injustice, their traditions will be inherited, and a far more just Britain, and world, will be built, however difficult that may sometimes be to imagine.

Introduction

How has hatred of working class people become so socially acceptable? Privately educated, multi-millionaire comedians dress up as chavs for our amusement in popular sitcoms such as Little Britain. Our newspapers eagerly hunt down horror stories about 'life among the chavs' and pass them off as representative of working-class communities.

Internet sites such as 'chavscum' brim with venom directed at the chav caricature. It seems as though working class people are the one group in society that you can say practically anything about. You would be hard pushed to find someone in Britain who hates chavs as much as Richard Hilton.

Mr Hilton is the chief executive of Gymbox, one of the trendier additions to London's flourishing fitness scene. Known for its creatively titled gym classes, Gymbox is unashamedly aimed at fitness freaks with deep pockets.

As Mr Hilton himself explains, Gymbox was launched to tap into the insecurities of its predominately white-collar professional clientele. 'Members were asking for self-defence classes, as they were scared of living in London', he says.

In spring 2009, Gymbox unveiled a new addition to its already eclectic range of classes: Chav fighting. 'Don't give moody grunting Chavs an ASBO', its website urged, 'give them a kicking'. The rest of the promotional spiel did not pull its punches either, in the voice of a vigilante with a good grasp of PR.

'Forget about stealing candy from a baby. We'll teach you how to take a Bacardi off a hoodie and turn a grunt into a while. Welcome to Chav Fighting, a place where the punch bags gather dust and the world is put to rights'.

The leaflets were even more candid. 'Why hone your skills on punch bags and planks of wood when you can deck some Chavs... a world where Bacardi Breezers are your sword and ASBOs are your trophy'. There were some who felt that glorifying beating people up might be overstepping the mark.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

When the Advertising Standards Authority was called in, Gymbox responded with technicalities. It was not offensive, the claimed, because 'nobody in society would admit to being a Chav; it was not a group to which people wanted to belong'.

Amazingly, the ASA cleared Gymbox on the basis that chav-fighting classes 'would be unlikely to condone or incite violence against particular social groups...'. You would have to speak to Richard Hilton to appreciate the depths of hatred that inspired the class.

It's no surprise that when asked if so-called chavs were getting a hard time in Britain, his response was blunt: 'No, they deserve it'. An extremely successful businessman, Richard Hilton has tapped into the fear and loathing felt by some middle-class Londoners towards the lower orders.

It is a compelling image: sweaty City bankers taking out their recession-induced frustrations on semi-bestial poor kids. Welcome to Gymbox, where class war meets personal fitness. It is easy to gasp at Hilton's unembarrassed hatred, but he has crudely painted a widespread middle-class image of the working-class teenager.

Thick. Violent. Criminal. 'Breeding' like animals. And of course, these chavs are not isolated elements: they are, after all, regarded as 'pillars of strength in the community'. Gymbox isn't the only British company to have exploited middle-class horror of large swathes of working-class Britain.

Chav-bashing has become a way of making money because it strikes a chord. This becomes still more obvious when an unrepresentative story in the headlines is used as a convenient hook to 'prove' the anti-chav narrative.

This form of class hatred has become an integral, respectable part of modern British culture. It is present in newspapers, television comedy shows, films, internet forums, social networking sites and everyday conversations.

At the heart of the 'chavs' phenomenon is an attempt to obscure the reality of the working-class majority. 'We're all middle class now', runs the popular mantra - all except for a feckless, recalcitrant rump of the old working class.

Simon Heffer is a strong advocate of this theory. One of the most prominent right-wing journalists in the country, he has often argued that 'something called the respectable working class has almost died out. What sociologists used to call the working class does not now usually work at all, but is sustained by the welfare state'.

It has given way to what he calls a 'feral underclass'. When I asked him what he meant by this, he replied: "The respectable working class has died out largely for good reason, because it was aspirational, and because society still provided the means of aspiration".

They had moved up the social ladder because 'they've gone to university, and they've got jobs in white-collar trades or professions, and they've become middle class'. Where the millions who remain in manual occupations, or the majority of the population who have not attended a university, fit into all this is an interesting question.

Heffer, however says there are really two main groups in British society: 'You don't have families any more that live in sort of respectable, humble circumstances for generation after generation. They either become clients of the welfare state and become the underclass, or they become middle class'.

This is the model of society as seen through Heffer's eyes. Nice, middle-class people on one side; an undredeemable detritus on the other and nothing in between. It bears no relation to how society is actually structured - but then why would it?

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

After all, the journalists producing this stuff have little, if any, contact with the people they disparage. Heffer has a thoroughly middle-class background, lives in the country, and sends his kids to Eton. At one point he admits: 'I don't know a great deal about the underclass', a fact that has not deterred him from repeatedly slagging them off.

There are some who defend the use of the word 'chav' and claim that, actually, working-class people are not demonized at all; 'chav' is simply used to designate anti-social hooligans and thugs. This is questionable.

To begin with, no one can doubt that those on the receiving end are exclusively working class. When 'chav' first appeared in the Collins English Dictionary in 2005, it was defined as 'a young working-class person who dresses in casual sports clothing'.

Since then, its meaning has broadened significantly. One popular myth makes it an acronym for 'Council Housed And Violent'. Many use it to show their distaste towards working-class people who have embraced consumerism, only to spend their money in supposedly tacky and uncivilized ways rather than with the discreet elegance of the bourgeoisie.

Celebrities from working-class backgrounds such as David Beckham, Wayne Rooney or Cheryl Cole, for example, are routinely mocked as Chavs. Above all, the term 'chav' now encompasses any negative traits associated with working-class people - violence, laziness, teenage pregnancies, racism, drunkenness, and the rest.

As Guardian journalist Zoe Williams wrote, "Chav" might have grabbed the popular imagination by seeming to convey something original, only it now covers so many bases as to be synonymous with "prole" or any word meaning "poor, and therefore worthless".

Even Christopher Howse, a leader writer for the conservative Daily Telegraph, objected that 'many people use chav as a smokescreen for their hatred of the lower classes... To call people chavs is no better than public schoolboys calling townies "oiks".

'Chavs' are often treated as synonymous with the 'white working class'. The BBC's 2008 White season of programmes dedicated to the same class was a classic example, portraying its members as backward-looking, bigoted and obsessed with race.

Indeed, while the 'working class' became a taboo concept in the aftermath of Thatcherism, the 'white working class' was increasingly spoken about in the early twenty-first century.

Because 'class' had for so long been a forbidden word within the political establishment, the only inequalities discussed by politicians and the media were racial ones. The white working class had become another marginalized ethnic minority, and this meant that all their concerns were understood solely through the prism of race.

They became presented as a lost tribe on the wrong side of history, disorientated by multiculturalism and obsessed with defending their identity from the cultural ravages of mass immigration. The rise of the idea of a 'white working class' fuelled a new liberal bigotry.

It was OK to hate the white working class, because they themselves were a bunch of racist bigots. One defence of the term 'chav' points out that 'Chavs themselves use the word, so what's the problem?' They have a point: some young working-class people have even embraced the word as a cultural identity.

But the meaning of a word often depends on who is using it. When uttered by a heterosexual, 'queer' is clearly deeply homophobic; yet some gay men have proudly appropriated it as an identity. Similarly, although 'Paki' is one of the most offensive racist terms a white person can use in Britain, some young Asians use it as a term of endearment among their peers.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

In 2010, a controversy involving right-wing US shock-jock Dr Laura Schlessinger vividly illustrated this point. After using the word 'nigger' on air eleven times in a conversation with an African-American caller, she attempted to defend herself on the grounds that black comedians and actors used it.

In all cases, the meaning of the word changes depending on the speaker. When uttered by a middle-class person, 'chav' becomes a term of pure class contempt. Liam Cranley, the son of a factory worker who grew up in a working-class community in Greater Manchester, describes to me his reaction when a middle-class person uses the word:

"You are talking about family: you're talking about my brother, you're talking about my mum. You're talking about my friends." Chav-hate is the product of a deeply unequal society. Demonizing people at the bottom has been a convenient way of justifying an unequal society throughout the ages. After all, in the abstract it would seem irrational that through an accident of birth, some should rise to the top while others remain trapped at the bottom.

But what if you're on top because you deserve to be? What if people at the bottom are there because of lack of skill, talent and determination? Yet it goes deeper than inequality. At the root of the demonization of working-class people is the legacy of a very British class war.

Margaret Thatcher's assumption of power in 1979 marked the beginning of an all-out assault on the pillars of working-class Britain. Its institutions, like trade unions and council housing, were dismantled; its industries, from manufacturing to mining were trashed; its communities were, in some cases, shattered, never to recover; and its values, like solidarity and collective aspiration, were swept away in favour of rugged individualism.

Stripped of their power and no longer seen as a proud identity, the working class was increasingly sneered at, belittled, and scapegoated. These ideas have caught on, in part, because of the eviction of working-class people from the world of the media and politics.

Politicians, particularly in the Labour Party, once spoke of improving the conditions of working-class people. But today's consensus is all about escaping the working class. The speeches of politicians are peppered with promises to enlarge the middle class.

'Aspiration' has been redefined to mean individual self-enrichment: to scramble up the social ladder and become middle class. Social problems like poverty and unemployment were once understood as injustices that sprang from flaws within capitalism, which, at the very least, had to be addressed.

Yet today they have become understood as the consequences of personal behaviour, individual defects and even choice. The plight of some working-class people is commonly portrayed as a 'poverty of ambition' on their part.

It is their individual characteristics, rather than a deeply unequal society rigged in favour of the privileged that is held responsible. In extreme form, this has even led to a new Social Darwinism. According to the evolutionary psychiatrist Bruce Charlton: 'Poor people have a lower average IQ than wealthy people... and this means that a much smaller percentage of working-class people than professional-class people will be able to reach the normal entrance requirements of the most selective universities'.

The chav caricature is set to be at the heart of British politics in the years ahead. After the 2010 general election, a Conservative-led government dominated by millionaires took office with an aggressive programme of cuts, unparalleled since the early 1920s.

The global economic crisis that began in 2007 may have been triggered by the greed and incompetence of a wealthy banking elite, yet it was working-class people who were, and are, expected to pay the

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

price. But any attempt to shred the welfare state is fraught with political difficulties, and so the government swiftly resorted to blaming its users.

Take Jeremy Hunt, a senior Conservative minister with an estimated wealth of £4.1 million. To justify the slashing of welfare benefits, he argued that long-term claimants had to 'take responsibility' for the number of children they had, and that the state would no longer fund large workless families.

In reality, just 3.4 percent of families in long-term receipt of benefits have four children or more. But Hunt was tapping into the age-old prejudice that the people at the bottom were breeding out of control, as well as conjuring up the tabloid caricature of the slobbish single mother who milks the benefits system by having lots of children.

The purpose was clear: to help justify a wider attack on some of the most vulnerable working-class people in the country. We are all prisoners of our class, but that does not mean we have to be prisoners of our class prejudices.

Similarly, class prejudice is part and parcel of a society deeply divided by class. Ultimately, it is not the prejudice we need to tackle; it is the fountain from which it springs.

The Strange Case of Shannon Matthews

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell wrote:

“Every middle class person has a dormant class prejudice which needs only a small thing to arouse it... The notion that the working class have been absurdly pampered, hopelessly demoralized by doles, old-age pensions, free education etc. ... It is still widely held; it has merely been a little shaken perhaps, but the recent recognition that unemployment does exist.”

Why does the life of one child matter more than another's? On the face of it, the disappearances of Madeline McCann in May 2007, and of Shannon Matthews in February 2008 bore striking similarities. Both victims were defenseless little girls.

Both vanished without a trace: Madeleine from her bedroom while she slept, Shannon on the way home from a swimming class. Both cases featured tearful televised appeals from the devastated mothers clutching the favorite toys of their beloved little girls, begging for their safe return.

After a fortnight, British journalists had penned 1,148 stories devoted to Madeleine McCann. The stunning sum of £2.6 million had been offered as a reward to have her returned to her parents. Prominent donors included the News of the World and the Sun newspapers, Sir Richard Branson, Simon Cowell and J.K. Rowling.

The missing infant quickly became a household name. The McCann disappearance was no ordinary media circus. The case became a national trauma. Like some sort of macabre reality TV show, every detail beamed into the living rooms of a transfixed British public.

News broadcasters sent their most celebrated anchors to report live from the Algarve. Members of parliament wore yellow ribbons in solidarity. Multinational companies advertised the 'help find Madeleine' messages on their websites.

The disappearance of one little girl had provoked the most extraordinary outpouring of media interest over such a case in modern times. The result was something approaching mass hysteria. What a contrast with the pitiful response to Shannon Matthew's disappearance.

After two weeks, the case had received a third of the media coverage given to McCann in the same period. There was no rolling news team from Dewsbury; no politicians wearing coloured ribbons; no 'help find Shannon' messages flashing up on company websites.

The relatively paltry sum of £50,000 had been offered for her discovery, nearly all of which had been put up by the Sun. If money was anything to go by, the life of Madeline McCann had been deemed fifty times more valuable than that of Shannon Matthews.

Why Madeleine? Some commentators were remarkably honest about why, of all the injustices in the world, it was the tragedy of this one little girl that provoked such anguish. 'This kind of thing doesn't usually happen to people like us', lamented Allison Pearson in the Daily Mail.

What Pearson meant by people like her was people from comfortable, middle-class backgrounds. Kidnappings, stabbings, murders; those are things you almost expected to happen to people living in Peckham or Glasgow.

This sort of tragedy was not supposed to happen to folks you might bump into doing the weekly shop at Waitrose. Pearson's distress at Madeleine's plight was matched only by her lack of sympathy for the case of Shannon Matthews. And it was for the same reason: the little girl's background.

Even as the police were losing hope of finding Shannon alive, Allison Pearson launched into a smug broadside about her family circumstances. 'Like too many of today's kids, Shannon Matthews was already a victim of a chaotic domestic situation, inflicted by parents on their innocent children, long before she vanished into the chilly February night'.

It was Pearson's only foray into the case. But when the McCanns came under fire for leaving their small children alone in the holiday flat from which Madeleine was abducted, she was one of their strongest defenders.

'The truth is that the McCanns were not negligent,' she said decisively. 'None of us should presume to judge them, for they will judge themselves horribly for the rest of their lives'.

This middle-class solidarity was shared by India Knight at the more upmarket Times. 'The resort the McCanns went to belongs to the Mark Warner holiday group, which specialises in providing family-friendly holidays to the middle classes,' she confided. They were not places you would expect to meet 'the kind of people who wallop their weeping kids in Sainsbury's'.

These are revealing confessions. These columnists' undoubtedly sincere grief was not simply caused by the kidnapping of a little girl. They were distressed, basically, because she was middle-class. It's easy to see why the McCann family were so appealing to middle-class journalists.

The parents were medical professionals from a smart suburb in Leicestershire. They were regular churchgoers. As a couple, they were photogenic, well groomed and bursting with health. When pictured lovingly tending to their twin babies, they represented an almost idealized portrait of middle-class family life.

Empathy for their plight came naturally to those like Allison Pearson and India Knight, because the McCann's lives were similar to their own. The contrast with the Matthews family could not have been greater.

Shannon grew up on an impoverished estate in an old industrial northern town. Her mother, Karen, had seven children from relationships with five different men. She did not work, while her partner, Craig Meehan, was a supermarket fishmonger.

Ms Matthews appeared to the world in unfashionable clothing, her hair pulled back, her face dour, without makeup and looking strikingly older than her thirty-two years. A slouching Mr Meehan stood next to her in a baseball cap, sweatshirt and tracksuit bottoms. They were definitely not 'people like us'.

The case simply could not provoke the same response among predominately middle-class journalists. And it did not. It's difficult to explain why else, even in the first week of the Matthews disappearance, newspapers were still opting to give frontpage coverage to possible sightings of Madeleine nine months after she had vanished.

Shannon's background was just too far removed from the experience of journalists who covered such stories. You don't need to indulge in psychobabble to understand why those who write and broadcast our news were so fixated with 'maddie' while displaying scant interest in a missing girl from a northern backwater.

Such comments open a window into the minds of educated, middle-class hacks. They had stumbled into a strange, unfamiliar territory. After all, they new nobody who had grown up in these circumstances. It's no surprise that they found it difficult to empathize with them.

This is not baseless speculation. The occasional journalist even confessed as much. Melanie Reid in The Times argued passionately that the middle classes simply did not understand the case 'because we are as removed from that kind of poverty as we are from events in Afghanistan. For life among the white working class of Dewsbury looks like a foreign country'.

The working-class residents of Dewsbury Moor were certainly painfully aware of the reasons behind the lack of interest in Shannon Matthews. They knew that many journalists had nothing but contempt for communities like their own.

Unlike Madeleine McCann, Shannon was found alive on 14 March 2008. She had been kidnapped, hidden in a divan bed and drugged to keep her quiet. As far as the public was aware at that point, an estranged distant relative had snatched her.

With Shannon safe, it was no longer considered tasteless to openly lay into her community. As one columnist wrote in the Birmingham Mail 'Karen Matthews, 32 but looking 60, glib hair falling across her face, is the product of a society which rewards fecklessness'.

Days after the girl was found, Melanie Phillips wrote that the affair helped to reveal 'the existence of an underclass which is a world apart from the lives that most of us lead and the attitudes and social conventions we take for granted'.

In a hysterical tirade, the writer alleged that there were 'whole communities where committed fathers are so rare that any child who actually has one risks being bullied', and where 'boys impregnate two, three, four girls with scarcely a second thought.' No evidence was given in support of these allegations.

In an increasingly poisonous atmosphere, some of the most extreme prejudices began to erupt into the open. One Conservative councillor in Kent, John Ward, suggested that: 'There is an increasingly strong case for compulsory sterilisation of all those who have had a second child, or third, or whatever, while living off state benefits.

When challenged, Mr Ward was unrepentant about calling for the sterilization of 'professional spongers' who he claimed 'breed for greed'. What John Ward was calling for was effectively Nazi eugenics, which is unacceptable in a Western democracy.

His view was shared by the dozens of Daily Mail readers who bombarded the newspaper with messages of support for the Tory Councillor. 'I fail to see the problem with his comments' wrote one. 'What a great idea' wrote another ' Lets see if the politicians are bold enough to adopt it'.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

'No doubt the liberal lefties will be up in arms, after all, they rely on the unemployed "chavs" to vote them into power'. 'The country is sinking under the weight of these sponging bludgers'.

Unhinged though some of these comments are, they undoubtedly reflect an undercurrent of hatred in British society. Over three weeks after her daughter had been found alive, Karen Matthews was dramatically arrested for the kidnap of her own nine-year-old daughter to pocket the reward money.

As if the case couldn't get any more surreal, Craing Meehan was charged with possessing child porn. The episode was like a flare, momentarily lighting up a world of class and prejudice in modern Britain. It was as though everyone in the country from a similar background was crammed into the dock alongside her.

Acting as the nation's judges, juries and executioners, the tabloids turned on Dewsbury Moor. Local residents were fair game: after all, they had the audacity to live on the same street as Karen Matthews.

'I personally feel, and local counsellors as a whole feel strongly, that the community demonstrated a unique strength, reflected local councillor Khizar Iqbal. "They all came together. Everyone was really concerned about the welfare of the child and wanted to see that child safe and well".

But this sense of a tightly knit working-class community, with limited resources, united behind a common cause, never became part of the Shannon Matthews story. It just didn't fit in with the Shameless image that the media was cultivating.

Nowhere in this coverage was the idea that someone could have the same background as Karen Matthews, without being horribly dysfunctional. Some journalists went as far as to suggest that people in these sorts of communities were somehow less than human.

Take Carole Malone, a highly paid columnist and TV pundit who regularly indulges in angry rants against whoever has miffed her that week. Despite her wealth, she felt qualified to pass judgement on people living on council estates because she used to live 'next' to one.

Malone spelt it out in black and white: Matthews 'belonged to that sub human class that now exists in the murkiest, darkest corners of this country'. They were 'good for nothing scroungers who have no morals, no compassion, no sense of responsibility and who are incapable of feeling love or guilt'.

According to Malone these communities were filthy, subhuman and devoid of the basic emotions. They were crawling with the type of person who would stage a kidnapping of their own daughter for cash, or, as the Daily Mail put it more succinctly - the 'feral underclass'.

Imagine that Carole Malone had been talking about people who were black, Jewish, or even Scottish. There would have been the most almighty uproar, and rightly so. Malone's career would be over and the Sun would be facing legal action for printing material that incited hatred.

But there was no outcry and no angry demands for her sacking. Why? Because the communities she was attacking are regarded as fair game. 'There is an ugly trend of bashing the less privileged developing in this country and I don't like it at all', pleaded Daily Star columnist Joe Mott at the height of the hysteria over Karen Matthews.

'Let's stop using the situation as an excuse to take cheap shots at the working class.' His was a lonely voice. As far as his fellow journalists were concerned, Karen Matthews wasn't a one-off. Britain was teeming with people like her.

As with all these things, there are always some elements of truth in what is being said, but they had extrapolated for effect or exaggerated to create a better story from the media's point of view.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Newspapers had directed their fire at Karen Matthews's background and who she is: her class, more than her as an individual.

Above all, underlying the coverage was the idea that the old working class had given way to a feckless "chav" rump. 'What was once a working class is now, in some places, an underclass', wrote Melanie McDonagh in the Independent.

'It is a decline that this unfortunate woman seems to embody'. This was after all at the heart of the caricature: that we are all middle class, apart from the chav remnants of a decaying working class. The Shannon Matthews affair was just one particularly striking example of the media using an isolated case to reinforce the 'chav' caricature: feckless, feral, and undeserving.

But it was far from the last. Now that the ball was rolling, the media enthusiastically seized on other cases to confirm this distorted portrayal. The news in November 2008 that a London toddler, initially known only as 'Baby P', had died as a result of horrific abuse at the hands of his mother and her partner provided one such case.

The spotlight again fell on people who lived outside the cosy confines of 'Middle England'. The Baby P horror fuelled what the Shannon Matthews affair had sparked in earnest: an attempt to dehumanize people living in poor working-class communities.

The few journalists who refrained from swelling the tide of bile were right to complain of 'cheap shots' at the working class. It is rare for the media's eye to fall on working-class people at all; when it does, it is almost always on outlandish individuals such as Karen Matthews, or Alfie Patten - a thirteen year old boy wrongly alleged to have fathered a child born in early 2009.

Journalists seemed to compete over finding the most gruesome story that could be passed off as representative of what remained of working-class Britain. 'They will look at the worst estate they can find, and the worst examples they can find', objected Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee.

'They will point their camera at the worst possible workless dysfunctional family and say, 'This is working-class life'. That's not to pretend there aren't people out there with deeply problematic lives, including callous individuals who inflict barbaric abuse on vulnerable children.

The point is that they are a very small number of people, and far from representative. Freakish exceptions - such as people with ten children who never had a job are eagerly sought out and presented as typical.

As Johann Hari of the Independent wrote: "There is a tiny proportion of highly problematic families who live chaotically and can't look after their children because they weren't cared for themselves. The number is hugely inflated to present them as paradigmatic of people from poor backgrounds".

Journalists' use of the Matthews case to caricature the supposed remnants of working-class Britain served a useful political purpose. Both the New Labour leadership and the Conservative party were determined to radically cut the number of people receiving benefits.

The media had helped to create the image of working-class areas degenerating into wholly unemployed communities full of feckless, work-shy, amoral, dirty, sexually debauched and even animal-like individuals.

Conservative organs such as the Daily Mail had used the fact that Karen Matthews did not have a job as a reason to attack the welfare state - a bit rich coming from a newspaper which is a fervent champion of 'stay-at-home' mothers.

The timing was perfect for politicians determined to give the welfare state a good kicking. You would think that millions of people were running around council estates, kidnapping their children in a crazed bid to cash in at the expense of the tabloid press.

It was against this backdrop that the centre proposed that the ten million or so social housing tenants in Britain 'should be rewarded for decent behaviour by giving them a stake in their property'. Rewarded for decent behavior. It's the sort of language used when dealing with prison inmates, children or pets.

A huge portion of Britain's population - all of them working class - was, in one fell swoop, implicated in Karen Matthews's actions. To the conservatives, Karen Matthews had become a convenient political prop. The Tory leader, David Cameron, himself used the affair to call for a drastic overhaul of the welfare state.

"The verdict last week on Karen Matthews and her vile accomplice is also a verdict on our broken society", he argued in the Daily Mail. "if only this was a one-off story". As part of the reforms offered in response, Cameron pledged to "end the something-for-nothing culture. If you don't take a reasonable offer of a job, you will lose benefits. No ifs, no buts".

Here it was again: a link between Karen Matthews and much larger groups of working-class people. It was a clever political tactic. If the wider British public were led to believe that people who shared her background were capable of the same monstrous behaviour, they would be more likely to support policies directed against them.

Tory proposals even contemplated investigating the home lives of the long-term unemployed. Conservative work and pensions spokesperson Chris Grayling justified the plans by arguing that although the Matthews's case "was a horrendous extreme... it raises the curtain on a way of life in so many of our most deprived estates, of entire households who have not had any productive life for generations".

If these senior politicians were to be believed, Karen Matthews had demonstrated that there was a great layer of people below middle-class society whose warped lifestyles were effectively subsidized by the welfare state.

"The attribution of this to the welfare state is just bizarre", commented Johann Hari. "It's an inversion of the argument used against the welfare state in the late nineteenth century that the poor were inherently morally indigent and fraudulent, so there was no point giving them help".

Of course, it is ludicrous to argue that a chronically dysfunctional individual like Karen Matthews was representative of working-class benefit recipients or council tenants, let alone the wider community.

Those politicians who argued that she was failed to mention the horror felt by the community at her daughter's disappearance, and the way they united with such determination to find her. Both journalists and politicians had used the reprehensible actions of one woman to demonize working-class people.

Why did they consider the case to be such an insight into what life was like for so many communities outside the middle-class world? The case said a lot more about the people reporting it than it did about those they were targeting.

Imagine you're a journalist from a middle-class background. You grow up in a nice middle-class town or suburb. You go to a private school and make friends with people from the same background. You end up at a good university with an overwhelmingly middle-class intake.

When you finally land a job in the media, you once again find yourself surrounded by people who were shaped by more or less the same circumstances. How are you going to have the faintest clue about people who live in a place like Dewsbury Moor?

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Increasingly, the lives of journalists have become divorced from those of the rest of us. On top of that, most journalists at those levels are given private medical insurance. So you're kind of taken out of everyday life.

Over half of the top hundred journalists were educated at a private school, a figure that is even higher than it was two decades ago. In stark contrast, only one in fourteen children in Britain share this background.

More than anything, it is this ignorance of working-class life that explains how Karen Matthews became a template for people living in working-class communities. One effect of this is a belief that society has become dominated by a large middle class, with the rest consisting of a working class that has degenerated into the 'chav' caricature.

Johann Hari often asked other media people what they thought the median income in Britain was. The reply was always dramatically above the actual figure. One senior editor estimated it as £80,000. This absurd figure is nearly four times higher than the true amount of £21,000.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Hari thought that it was nonsense to think of Karen Matthews as anything other than a "pitiable freak". The journalists who reported on Shannon Matthews are almost all from the same background, and hopelessly out of touch with ordinary life.

So how has this happened? The reality is that it is more and more difficult for people from working-class backgrounds to get a foot in the door of newspapers or broadcasters. If more people in the media had grown up in communities like Dewsbury Moor, we might expect coverage to be more balanced when dealing with these issues.

The odds of that happening as things stand are somewhere approaching nil. NUJ leader Jeremy Dear thinks that the reason for this is simple. Increasingly, wannabe journalists have to pay for their own training, which usually means having at least one degree.

That leaves a huge amount of debt on their shoulders when starting out in a profession with notoriously low wages for junior staff. "The only people who can do that are those with financial support", he says. "That is, those whose parents can support them, which means the nature of those going into journalism has changed dramatically".

With the lives of ordinary people purged from the media, extreme cases such as Karen Matthews practically had a monopoly on the reporting of working-class life. "Working-class people have completely ceased to exist as far as the media, popular culture and politicians are concerned", argues Polly Toynbee. "All that exists are nice middle-class people - nice people who own their own home, who the Daily Mail like. You don't get much popular imagery of ordinary people of a neutral, let alone positive kind".

Like those who write and broadcast our news, the corridors of political power are dominated by people from one particular background. It's true to say that MPs aren't exactly representative of the sort of people who live on most of our streets.

Those sitting on Parliament's green benches are over four times more likely to have gone to a private school than the rest of us. Among Conservative MPs, a startling three out of every five have attended a private school.

A good chunk of the political elite were schooled at the prestigious Eton College alone, including Tory leader David Cameron and nineteen other Conservative MPs. There was once a tradition, particularly on the Labour benches, of MPs who had started off working in factories and mines.

Those days are long gone. Fewer than one in twenty MPs started out as manual workers, a number that has halved since 1987. Back in 1996, Labour's then deputy leader John Prescott echoed the Blairite mantra to claim that "we're all middle class now", a remark that would perhaps be more fitting if he had been talking about his fellow politicians.

If these MPs do have an understanding of life in places like Dewsbury Moor, one wonders where they got it. Just because a politician has a privileged background, it doesn't mean that they will lack sympathy for those who are less fortunate. Nonetheless, the odds of them understanding the realities of working-class communities are, unavoidably, considerably lower.

After all, how could someone like former Prime Minister David Cameron even begin to understand a community like Dewsbury Moor? He's not exactly the sort of bloke you'd bump into in your local pub. He counts King William IV as an ancestor, his dad is a wealthy stockbroker, and his family have been making a killing in finance for decades.

His wife, a senior director of one luxury goods business and owner of another, is the daughter of a major landowner and happens to be a descendant of King Charles the second. One of the Conservatives' few working-class MPs, former Junior Transport Minister Mike Penning, admits that the lack of politicians from working class backgrounds impinges on their ability to relate to people in communities like Dewsbury Moor.

"It's physically impossible for someone to have an understanding of and empathy with the problems that some are having, such as being made redundant. You don't know what that's like unless you've been made redundant".

Part of the problem, he argues, was the difficulties getting into the political world. "It is without doubt, no matter what political party you come from, extortionately difficult to get into the Great House unless you have some kind of leg-up the greasy pole", he says.

The fact that the British elite is stacked full of people from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds helps to explain a certain double standard at work. Crimes committed by the poor will be seen as an indictment of anyone from a similar background.

The same cannot be said for crimes where a middle-class individual is culpable. The mass-murdering GP Harold Shipman might have gone down as a monster, but did anyone argue that his case shone a light on life in middle-class Britain?

Where were the outraged tabloid headlines and politicians' sound-bites about middle-class communities. Although cases such as the disappearance of Shannon Matthews are used as launch pads for attacks on so-called spongers, the wealthy do not receive anywhere near the same level of attention from the media or politicians.

Welfare fraud is estimated to cost the Treasury around £1 billion a year. But, as detailed investigations by chartered accountant Richard Murphy have found, £70 billion is lost through tax evasion every year - that is, seventy times more.

If anything, 'welfare evasion' is more of a problem, with billions of pounds worth of tax credits left unclaimed each year. The cruel irony is that poor people who live in communities like Dewsbury Moor actually pay more in tax as a proportion of their wage packets than many of the rich journalists and politicians who attack them.

But where is the outcry over middle-class spongers? Given the media's distorted coverage, it's hardly surprising that people significantly underestimate the cost of tax avoidance and overestimate the cost of benefit fraud.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Leading politicians and journalists had no interest in allowing the Shannon Matthews affair to go down in history as just another example of the capacity of some individuals for cruelty. A mother's grotesque ploy to use her vulnerable daughter for financial gain was deliberately inflated into something much greater, for the purposes of journalists and politicians determined to prove that traditional working-class communities had decayed into a morally depraved, work-shy rump.

It speaks volumes about class in Britain today. It would be dishonest to say that communities like Dewsbury Moor don't have their fair share of problems, even if they're not full of abusive unemployed parents running amok.

The important question is, who is to blame: the communities, or the policies of successive governments over the last three decades? And how has Britain become so polarized that derision and contempt for "chavs" has become so deeply ingrained in our society?

This coverage was part of an effort to portray our society as divided into Middle England on the one hand and a pack of anti-social chavs living in places like Dewsbury Moor on the other. It's a myth. You wouldn't know it from the media coverage but most of us think of ourselves as working class.

As a poll published in October 2007 revealed, that's how over half the population described themselves. This figure has remained more or less steady since the 1960s. People of all classes might, for various reasons, mischaracterize their place in the social pecking order.

In today's Britain the number of people employed in blue-collar manual and white-collar routine clerical jobs represents over half the workforce, more than twenty-eight million workers. We're a nation of secretaries, shop assistants and admin employees.

The lives of the majority are virtually ignored by journalists and politicians. Needless to say, over half the population has nothing in common with Karen Matthews. And yet the rare appearances made by working-class people on the public stage are more likely than not to be stories about hate figures, however legitimate, such as Karen Matthews.

As with most stereotypes, there are grains of truth in the 'chav' caricature. It is undeniable that many working-class communities across Britain suffer from high levels of unemployment. They do have relatively large numbers of benefit recipients, and crime levels are high.

Yet the blame has been directed at the victims rather than at the policies promoted by successive governments over recent decades. Dewsbury Moor is a good example. The ward finds itself in the top 10 percent for overall deprivation and child poverty.

As we have seen with the bile spewed out by journalists during the Shannon Matthews affair, the detractors argue that this is largely due to the fecklessness of the people who live there. They're wrong. Governments have effectively socially engineered these working-class communities to have the problems that they have.

We've come a long way since Labour's Aneurin Bevan founded modern council housing in the aftermath of world war 2. Above all, his aim was to create mixed communities. He reasoned that this would help people from different backgrounds to understand one another, breaking down the sort of prejudices we see today directed at chavs.

This laudable principle has been fatally undermined by policies introduced in the Thatcher era which New Labour have been happy to keep in place. Council estates like Dewsbury Moor now display the exact opposite result to that originally intended by Bevan.

As the 1970s drew to a close, more than two in five of us lived in council housing. That was before the Thatcher government launched the 'right-to-buy' scheme. As council housing collapsed, remaining stock was prioritized for those most in need.

Many, but not all, of those who remained in council housing were too poor to take advantage of the right-to-buy scheme. Now, over two-thirds of those living in social housing belong to the poorest two-fifths of the population.

Nearly half of social housing is located in the poorest fifth of neighbourhoods. If places like Dewsbury Moor have social problems it is because they have been made to have them. Because of the sheer concentration of Britain's poorest living in social housing, council estates easily become associated with the so-called 'chavs'.

While it is true that about half of Britain's poor own their homes, they too tend to live on estates. The increasing transformation of council estates into social dumping grounds has provided much ammunition for the theory that Britain is divided into middle-class society and a working class chav rump, suffering from an epidemic of self-inflicted problems.

Thatcherism unleashed a tsunami of de-industrialization, decimating communities such as Dewsbury Moor. When Thatcher came to power in 1979, over seven million of us earned a living in manufacturing. Thirty years later, this was true for less than half as many - a mere 2.83 million - not least because factories had relocated to developing countries where workers cost less.

The town of Dewsbury was once home to a thriving textile industry. Over the past three decades, these jobs have all but disappeared. At the bottom of the street where Karen Matthews once lived are dozens of disused lockups, including abandoned textile mills and expansive industrial estates.

So what do people do? What choices do people have for work? There's no other place to work for any significant job. This has had a destabilizing effect on the community. The sense of community they once had has evaporated.

The lack of large manufacturing firms made it very difficult for those who had not succeeded in education to find a job. The impact of this industrial collapse can be seen on the Matthews family. Both the grandparents and parents worked in local industry, particularly in textiles.

And yet, as Karen Matthews's mother put it: "The town has changed now. The textiles have gone and there aren't the same jobs as there were". Manufacturing in areas like Dewsbury Moor used to provide secure, relatively well-paid, highly unionized jobs that were passed down from generation to generation.

"The decline of the British manufacturing and industrial base has decimated communities up and down the country", says Labour MP Katy Clark. Industry was the linchpin of local communities. Its sudden disappearance from places like Dewsbury Moor caused massive unemployment during the 1980s.

Today the official unemployment rate in the area is only a percentage point above the national average. But if you exclude people engaged in full-time study, well over a quarter of the people in Dewsbury West are classed as 'economically inactive'.

The main reason is that many of those who lost their jobs were officially classified as ill or incapacitated, in a process common to all the areas that lost their industries in the 1980s and 1990s. It is difficult to argue that this is because they are lazy scroungers.

In late 2008, the government announced plans to push 3.5 million benefit recipients into jobs. At the same time they estimated that there were only around half a million vacancies. That's the lowest on record. People are out of work in places like Dewsbury Moor quite simply because there are not enough jobs to go around.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

It is clear that the 'chav' caricature epitomized by Karen Matthews has sunk deep roots into British society. More and more of us are choosing to believe that the victims of social problems are, in large part, responsible for causing them.

Three-quarters of us, for example, thought that the gap between high and low incomes was 'too large' in 2006 - but only slightly over a third supported spending more on welfare benefits for the poor. While nearly half of us felt that an unemployed couple should be classed as 'hard-up' in 1986, that level declined to just over a third by 2005.

Even more strikingly, while only 19 percent felt that poverty was caused by laziness or a lack of willpower in 1986, the figure had increased to 27 percent twenty years later. Inequality has grown sharply while social mobility has declined.

Demonizing the less well-off makes it easier to justify an unprecedented and growing level of social inequality. To admit that so many people are poorer than others because of the social injustice inherent in our society would require government action.

We're developing a culture where it's acceptable and indeed normal to speak of the white working class in very dehumanizing language, and this is a common symptom of a highly unequal society. The Shannon Matthews affair casts a disquieting light on modern Britain. It didn't spark contempt for working-class people. It simply exposed prejudices that have become rampant in our society.

The hysteria around the case shows that it is possible to say practically anything about those caricatured as chavs. Somehow a huge part of Britain has been made complicit in crimes they had nothing to do with. With neither middle-class politicians nor journalists showing any willingness to give a platform to the reality of working-class communities, the pitifully dysfunctional lives of a tiny minority of individuals have been presented as a case study of modern life outside so-called Middle-England.

'Chavs' have become more despised than practically any other group of people. Where has this hatred come from? There is certainly nothing new about venting spite against those at the bottom of the pile. In the nineteenth century, the harsh Poor Laws threw the destitute and unemployed into workhouses where they toiled in hellish conditions, and commentators debated whether the respectable working class was giving way to a debauched rump they labelled the 'residuum'.

The rise of eugenics in the early twentieth century led even some who considered themselves left-wing to argue for the sterilization of the 'unfit' poor - or even for their extermination. Chav-bashing draws on a long, ignoble tradition of class hatred.

But it cannot be understood without looking at more recent events. Above all, it is the bastard child of a very British Class War.

Class Warriors

The Tories have, in modern times, been at pains to present themselves as standing above class and sectional interests. 'One Nation' was one of their most treasured phrases throughout much of the twentieth century.

When David Cameron was elected leader of the Conservative Party in 2005, the Tories were, to begin with, full of fluffy rhetoric about understanding marginalized young people, and even about narrowing the gap between rich and poor.

Cameron wants to 'hug a hoodie', mocked New Labour. But as soon as they are safely behind closed doors, away from the cameras, the cuddly PR-speak can abruptly disappear. The demonization of the working class cannot be understood without looking back at the Thatcherite experiment of the 1980s

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

that forged the society we live in today. At its core was an offensive against working-class communities, industries, values and institutions. No longer was being working class something to be proud of: it was something to escape from.

This vision did not come from nowhere. It was the culmination of a class war waged, on and off, by the Conservatives over two centuries. This is certainly not the way the Conservative Party has sought to present itself in public.

Whenever the interests of its 'coalition of the privileged interests' have been menaced by even the most moderate arguments for social reform, it has decried them as attempts at 'class war'. A cursory look at its history uncloaks a party that has always defended 'privileged interests', particularly against the threat posed by working-class Britons.

Throughout the nineteenth century the Tories were fervent opponents of allowing any but the richest to vote. When the 1831 Reform Bill was presented to parliament, proposing to extend suffrage to as many as one out of every five adult males, the Tory reaction was hysterical.

One Tory MP sensationally alleged that the Bill represented 'a revolution that will overturn all the natural influence of rank and property'. Lord Salisbury, the future Tory prime minister, sulked about the expanding suffrage with dark predictions that 'first-rate men will not canvass mobs, and mobs will not elect first-rate men'.

It was in the twentieth century that the Tories and their coalition of privileged interests would face their greatest political threat. Working class people had organized themselves into trade unions by the million. These Unions went on to found the Labour Party with the specific mission of representing working class interests in Parliament for the first time.

Well before Thatcher, the Tories launched rearguard actions against this menace. When trade unions launched a general strike in 1926, the Tory government warned of red revolution and mobilized the armed forces.

After the strike was broken, senior conservative and irreconcilable class warrior Arthur Balfour boasted: 'The General Strike has taught the working class more in four days than years of talking could have done'.

As part of this lesson, mass picketing and any strikes launched in support of other workers were banned, and union links with Labour were weakened. The working class was put back in its box. In view of all this one may well wonder how, in an age of democracy, the Tories could ever have hoped to win an election.

But the Conservatives are the most successful political party in the Western world. They governed Britain for two-thirds of the twentieth century. If everyone has the vote, then why would working-class people vote for a political gravy train for the rich?

Up to a third of manual workers voted Tory in the early twentieth century. The Conservatives win by giving just enough to just enough other people'. The Tories have always sought to weaken the collective power of working-class people as a group in society.

But they also knew how to win elections by courting working class voters as individuals, by methods which were frequently ingenious. One common ploy was moderate social reform with conservative ends. Benjamin Disraeli introduced limited progressive measures such as reducing the maximum working day to ten hours and banning children from working full-time.

His calculation was that it would 'gain and retain for the Conservatives the lasting affection of the working classes'. Of course, the whole point of the Disraelian Toryism was to preserve the existing social

order. It is a deeply held and sincere Conservative belief that what is good for business is good for the country.

But there is no escaping the fact that the Tory leadership has always been dominated by the wealthiest elements of society, determined to thwart reforms offered first by the Liberals and then by the Labour Party. Sticks alone could not contain the working class in a democratic system: carrots had to be offered too.

The Tories have long used populism as a trump card to win working-class support. From the late nineteenth century they tapped into a growing backlash against Irish and Jewish immigration, culminating in the introduction of the restrictive Aliens Bill in 1904.

Promised crackdowns on immigration have been a mainstay of Tory electioneering ever since. Flying the flag in a range of ways has invariably aided the Conservative cause: for example, appealing to nationalist sentiments by opposing self-rule for Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century.

And of course, popular fear of crime has long been fertile political territory for a party with a tough law-and-order message. They have lost their salience today, but religious allegiances once played a major role. Before 1914, if you were staunchly Church of England you were pretty likely to vote Conservative.

Today's Liverpool may be the most solidly Labour city in Parliament, but religious sectarianism and Tory anti-Catholicism once made it a hub of working class Toryism. Social aspiration has been another fruitful vote-catcher, as well as a means of undermining working-class identity.

There was room at the top, ran the promise: you could improve your lot by edging up the social ladder. In areas devoid of a strong middle class - Scotland, Wales and most of Northern England - this had limited appeal.

But where there was a solid middle-class, people from working-class backgrounds were always more likely to opt for the Tories. It was a way of keeping up with the Joneses - and even, so they thought, of joining them.

Above all, the Tories have been able to win working-class support through ruthless pragmatism. After World War 2, the Tories and their supporters were forced onto the back foot. Recent memories of the Great Depression seemed to have permanently discredited free-market capitalism, and the Tories had no option but to accept the welfare state, higher taxation and a strong union movement.

With the Conservatives in power throughout the 1950s and the unions and Labour taking a moderate direction, some Tories could not resist speculating that they had the upper hand. 'The class war is over and we have won it', declared Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1959.

This ceasefire did not last long. The new consensus unravelled in the 1970s as company profits went into free fall and the trade unions flexed their muscles once more. Suddenly it looked as if the class war was back on. This time, a new generation of Tories intended to win it - for good.

Few men can claim to have had as much influence over modern Britain as Keith Joseph. The son of a construction magnet, Joseph was the most prominent figure of the Tory right in the early 1970s. When the Conservatives were defeated in two successive general elections in 1974, Joseph became one of the leaders of a new breed of Tory who rejected the post-war consensus of welfare capitalism that had been upheld by earlier Conservative governments.

Instead, they wanted to curb union power, sell off state-owned industries and return to nineteenth century principles of laissez-faire capitalism. Keith Joseph and his laissez-faire cabal were supporters of American free-market guru Milton Friedman.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

When in 1974, the Labour Party returned to Downing Street with a promise ‘to bring about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families’, Friedman’s ideas were still largely confined to the textbooks.

The exception was Chile, where in 1973 General Augusto Pinochet, with American backing, had removed the elected socialist President Salvador Allende in one of the most brutal coups in Latin America’s tortured history.

Pinochet shared one of the main aims of his ideological soulmates in Britain: to erase the working class as a concept. His goal, he declared, was to ‘make Chile not a nation of proletarians, but a nation of entrepreneurs’.

But Keith Joseph blew his chance to lead a similar project through the ballot box in Britain. Although Joseph was only repeating prejudices long held among many wealthier Britons, his mistake was to repeat them in public.

In his place his protégée Margaret Thatcher, the MP for Finchley, stood and won. Following her election in 1979, the Conservatives would launch the country’s most audacious experiment in social engineering since the Puritans ruled England over three hundred years earlier.

‘We have to move this country in a new direction, to change the way we look at things, to create a wholly new attitude of mind’, Thatcher urged her party. To understand Thatcherism’s attitude towards working-class Britain, it is important to start by looking at Thatcher herself.

Some of her warmest admirers have often been at pains to portray her - wrongly - as a person of humble origins. As David Davis said “Margaret was always a bit more middle class than she made out”. It is almost a cliché to describe her as a grocer’s daughter, but it was this that coloured her entire political outlook.

Growing up in the Lincolnshire market town of Grantham, her father had instilled in her a deep commitment to what could be called lower-middle-class values: individual self-enrichment and enterprise, and an instinctive hostility to collective action.

Her biographer, Hugo Young, noted that she had little if any contact with working-class people, let alone the trade union movement. Her attitudes were undoubtedly cemented when in 1951 she married a wealthy businessman, Denis Thatcher, who believed that trade unions should be banned altogether.

In her first cabinet, 86 percent of ministers were former public school students, 71 percent were company directors and 14 percent were large landowners. No wonder, then, that one of her cabinet ministers told a journalist just before the 1979 election: “She is basically a Finchley lady... She regards the working class as idle, deceitful, inferior and bloody-minded”.

If Thatcher had one aim, it was to stop us thinking in terms of class. “Class is a communist concept”, she would later write. “It groups people as bundles and sets them against one another”. She wanted to erase the idea that people could better their lives by collective action, rather than by individual self-improvement: that is, “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps”.

Morality is personal. There is no such thing as collective conscience, collective kindness, collective gentleness, collective freedom”, she planned to argue. “To talk of social justice, social responsibility, a new world order, may be easy and make us feel good, but it does not absolve each of us from personal responsibility”.

“There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families”. The Tories might be a party rooted in Britain’s class divisions, but they are at pains to deflect any reminders of this fact.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

It implies that one group possesses wealth and power in society, while others do not. If you accept that much, it is only a step to concluding that this is something that needs to be rectified. It suggests that a group of people live by working for others, which raises questions of exploitation.

It encourages you to define your own economic interests against those of others. But, above all, it conjures up the notion of a potentially organized bloc with political and economic power, and one that could wage war against wealth and privilege.

That made the existence of the working class as a concept the mortal enemy of Thatcher's everyone-for-themselves model of capitalism. Thatcher had not the slightest ambition to get rid of social classes, she just didn't want us to perceive that we belonged to one.

"It's not the existence of classes that threatens the unity of the nation, but the existence of class feeling", as an official Conservative Party document put it in 1976. And yet, at the same time, Thatcherism fought the most aggressive class war in British history: by battering the trade unions into the ground, shifting the tax burden from the wealthy to the working class and the poor, and stripping businesses of state regulations.

Thatcher wanted to end the class war - but on the terms of the upper crust of British society. "Old-fashioned Tories say there isn't any class war", declared Tory newspaper editor Peregrine Worthington. "New Tories make no bones about it: we are class warriors and we expect to be victorious".

At the centre of this crusade was a concerted attempt to dismantle the values, institutions and traditional industries of the working class. The aim was to rub out the working class as a political and economic force in society, replacing it with a collection of individuals, or entrepreneurs, competing with each other for their own interests.

In a new, supposedly upwardly mobile Britain, everyone would aspire to climb the ladder and all those who did not would be responsible for their own failure. Class was to be eliminated as an idea but it was to be bolstered in practice.

There has been no greater assault on working-class Britain than Thatcher's two-pronged attack on industry and trade unions. It was not just that the systematic trashing of the country's manufacturing industries devastated communities, though it certainly did, leaving them ravaged by unemployment, poverty and all the crippling social problems that accompany them, for which they would later be blamed.

Working-class identity itself was under fire. The old industries were the beating hearts of the communities they sustained. Most local people had worked in similar jobs and had done so for generations. And of course the unions, whatever their faults and limitations, had given the workers in these communities strength, solidarity and a sense of power.

All this had sustained a feeling of belonging, of pride in a shared working-class experience. For those who grew up in a country without strong unions, it is easy to understate the significance of Thatcherism's war on the organized working class.

Such was Thatcher's legacy that when Labour came to power in 1997, Tony Blair could boast that even after his proposed reforms, trade union laws would remain "the most restrictive" in the Western world. When working-class people were demonized before the advent of Thatcherism, it was almost always because of fear of the unions.

Aggressive picketers and "unions holding the country to ransom" were mainstays of newspaper copy. At the heart of the Tory strategy was their clever manipulation of a series of strikes by largely low-paid public sector workers in 1978 and 1979 - or, as it became known, the Winter of Discontent.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Even today, over thirty years later, the Winter of Discontent remains a kind of right-wing folk story used to bash unions whenever there is even a murmur of industrial unrest. Scenes of uncollected rubbish rotting in the streets and the dead going unburied are recounted in almost apocalyptic tones.

Yet the strikes were almost completely avoidable. “What really kicked things off in the late 1960s was the start of economic liberalization and the removal of credit controls, leading to excessive credit growth”, says former City economist Graham Turner.

Another factor was the printing of huge sums of money by the American government to pay for the Vietnam war, which unleashed a tidal wave of inflation across the West. Low-paid workers like refuse collectors went on strike in the winter of 1978-79 because their living standards were in free fall, and they were being made to pay for an inflationary crisis that they had not part in creating.

Tony Benn was a minister in the Labour Cabinet during the Winter of Discontent. “It was a conflict, an economic conflict between working people on the one hand and their employers on the other, and the government supported the employers, in effect”, he recalls.

“And it led to a great deal of disillusionment”. There is no doubting that the Winter of Discontent fuelled popular frustration with unions. Right-wing tabloids went into overdrive making it look like Britain was descending into chaos.

Members of the public faced inconvenience because of cancelled services. The increasingly impoverished workers who had been forced to strike did not get a hearing. Thatcher’s government relentlessly manipulated these memories.

Its goal was to crush the unions forever. New laws allowed employers to sack strikers, reduced dismissal compensation, forbade workers to strike in support of others, repealed protections preventing courts seizing union funds, and made unions liable for huge financial penalties.

Changing the law was not, however, enough, examples had to be made. The government inflicted a series of defeats on unions in set-piece battles with the public sector, and encouraged private sector employers to take on the unions.

The first to face Thatcher’s iron fist were the steel-workers in 1980, who lost a thirteen week strike battle and would pay the price with thousands of jobs. Three years later, striking workers on picket lines at the Stockport Messenger were charged by 3,000 riot police and beaten up in neighbouring fields.

Their union, the National Graphical Association, had its assets seized by the government. In the face of this onslaught you might have expected the trade unions to rally together and fight back. But they didn’t. Unions - and the Labour Party for that matter - were hopelessly divided.

Their leaders were caught disastrously off-balance by the determination and ferocity of the Thatcherite crusade. The government took note of the weakness of its enemies, and picked off those workers who dared to fight back.

But all the laws and set-piece battles, combined did not have the same crushing effect as another of Thatcher’s weapons: Britain’s ever-growing dole queues. The Tories had made a big deal out of the fact that unemployment had reached a million under Labour in 1979, employing the ad firm Saatchi & Saatchi to design their famous ‘Labour isn’t Working’ poster.

But under Thatcher, some estimates put the number out of work as peaking at four million. The terror of losing your job suppresses any temptation to fight back. When I asked Thatcher’s first chancellor of the exchequer, Geoffrey Howe, if mass unemployment had a role in restraining union power, he agreed.

“I think it had in demonstrating the emptiness of continuing to behave the way they were behaving”. But he was quick to add, his policies were not “a conscious medicine to achieve that”. Even so, one of the great achievements of Thatcherism, as far as Howe was concerned was crushing ‘trade union tyranny’.

Others involved with the Tory governments put it rather more bluntly. When Sir Adam Budd was the Treasury’s chief economist in the early 1990s, he told the BBC he suspected that the government “never believed for a moment that this was the correct way to bring down inflation.

They did however see that it would be a very, very good way to raise unemployment, and unemployment was an extremely desirable way of reducing the strength of the working classes”.

Within three months of sweeping to power in 1979, the Tories dramatically abolished exchange controls, allowing financial companies to make huge profits from currency speculation. This allowed the City to thrive at the expense of other parts of the economy, like manufacturing.

But above all, it was allowing the value of the pound to soar, making exports far more expensive than overseas competitors. By 1983, just after five years, nearly a third of manufacturing had vanished from Britain’s shores. Once- thriving working-class communities lay in ruin.

Now, at a time of economic crisis caused by overdependence on the City and a depleted manufacturing base, even leading Tory figures today are talking about the need for Britain to start making things again. Many of the old industrial communities remain in pieces.

But remorse for Thatcherism’s scorched-earth policies is difficult to come by. As far as Howe is concerned, manufacturing only has itself to blame. “Everyone regrets it, yes. It was so much caused by the behaviour of industry itself... I’ve often questioned the suicide note of much of British industry at that time”.

As Larry Elliot of the Guardian said “The Tories came into power and made a series of catastrophic economic blunders, sending the pound shooting up on foreign exchanges, which made our exports highly uncompetitive”.

In other words, industry had been stripped from Britain because of government policy, not because of the onward march of history. No other Western European nation saw the obliteration of manufacturing in such a brutally short period.

While Thatcherism left manufacturing to bleed to death in the 1980s, the New Labour government pumped billions of pounds of taxpayer’s money into banks whose greed and stupidity had left them teetering on the edge of collapse. The reason?

The banks were too big to fail. All of this prompts the question: did the Tories have any interest in saving manufacturing, crocodile tears or no? As far as Thatcher and her acolytes were concerned, finance and services were the future; making things belonged to the past.

Thatcher’s attacks on unions and industry dealt body blows to the old, industrial working class. Well-paid, secure, skilled jobs that people were proud of, which had been a linchpin of working-class identity, were eradicated.

All the things people associated with working-class Britain were disappearing. But even after Thatcher won again in 1983, Britain’s working-class was not quite dead as a political and social force. The decisive battle was still to come.

The Tories under Ted Heath had been swept from office by a national miner’s strike in 1974. Heath had asked the electorate: “Who governs Britain?” The answer came back: “Not you, mate!”. It was a humiliating defeat, and the first time that unions had effectively overthrown a government.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Thatcher had not forgotten it. Her response must rank as one of the most callous acts of revenge in British history. Retribution wasn't the only motive. The miners had been the vanguard of the union movement in Britain throughout the twentieth century.

Britain's only general strike had been called in support of the miners in 1926. They had the capacity to single-handedly bring the country to a standstill by cutting off its energy supply, as they demonstrated in the 1970s.

If you could see off the miners, what other group of workers could stop you? That's why the defeat of the Miners' strike was the turning point in the history of modern working-class Britain. "Mining communities were vibrant communities, but they were built around the pit.

The pit was the heart of the community, it was the pit that bound everyone together", recalls one National Union of Mineworkers leader, Chris Kitchen. "The code of honour that existed underground was part of the fabric of the community as well.

You didn't get young lads going off the rails at the weekend. You wouldn't upset an old guy because he would be the same one you'd rely on in the pit to protect your life at work, so why would you upset him at the weekend over a few pints?"

When Thatcher's government unveiled its pits closure programme in 1984, many of these tightly knit communities faced oblivion. Strikes spontaneously broke out in the Yorkshire coalfields and spread across the country.

NUM leader Arthur Scargill declared these strikes a national strike and called all miners out, a decision ratified by the national conference in April that year. Of the major pits, only the Nottinghamshire miners - who wrongly, as it turned out, thought their jobs were safe - refused to strike, a cause of great bitterness among the wider mining community.

As Tony Benn recalls, the struggle "electrified the labour movement. Wherever you went there was tremendous support and activity". But in the national media and among Thatcher's supporters, Scargill became a hate figure.

There was also fear, not least at the excitement generated by the miners' struggle. Unlike most Nottinghamshire miners, Adrian Gilfoyle went on strike until the bitter end. Above all, he remembers the comradeship of workign down the pit.

"The strike were important because of saving jobs", he says. "I've got two lads - obviously I wouldn't have wanted them to go down pit if they could get another job, but at least, when they grew up, there was that opportunity if there weren't any other jobs, to go there, and it was a good apprenticeship. It was worth fighting for".

At times, the struggle felt like class war in the most literal sense. "You used to wake up at around five o'clock in the morning, and there were these police from London, and they were banging their shields at five in the morning, waking everybody up", Gilfoyle recalls.

"You wouldn't have believed it, honestly. Horrible, it was. But it made me even more determined, when you got all that, you see". Yet all that was nothing compared to the Battle of Orgreave. On 18 June 1984, up to 6,000 miners attempted to blockade a coking plant in Orgreave, South Yorkshire.

Adrian Gilfoyle was among them. They were met by thousands of police officers, including several on horseback, from ten counties across Britain. Suddenly, the police charged.

“That day, when the trouble started, they all made out it was the miners responsible... There were all the pickets, doing nothing, and all of a sudden the police just charged with horses, and that’s when all the trouble started.

And I remember, me and my brother stood there watching and couldn’t believe it, and next thing, this copper was chasing us on a horse, and we just managed to get out of his way, and he hit this other lad straight across the back of the head with a truncheon and split his head open.

We ran and got into Asda, and the manager stopped police coming in, and he said to us: “Just get a basket, put in what you want, and get off and I’ll support you.” It was horrible, though”.

All the trials of the picketers arrested by the police collapsed, and hundreds of thousands of pounds were paid out in compensation. Like many striking miners, Gilfoyle depended on the support of his wife. “She was in the Women’s Action Group and all sorts. She went to marches all over the place, and she went to Ollerton when that lad got killed, she went to his funeral.”

The Miners’ Stike collapsed on 3 March 1985, after a titanic year-long struggle. Brass bands and union banners accompanied the miners as they arched defiantly back to work. “Maggie had her way, didn’t she?” said Gilfoyle. “And we went back with our tails between our legs really”.

Unlike in 1974, the government had made detailed preparations. It had stuck by the Ridley Plan, a Conservative Party document, leaked in 1978 which was a blueprint for taking on the unions, and the miners in particular, including the stockpiling of coal.

Other unions and the Labour leadership refused to back the miners, because they had not held a national ballot. “It divided the labour movements from the Labour leadership really, because the Labour leadership was giving virtually no support to the miners”, says Tony Benn.

Whatever the reasons adduced to avoid backing the miners, the fate of the labour movement was bound up with the strike. The defeat was a crippling blow from which it never recovered. The miners had been the strongest unionized force in the country: if they could be routed, what hope for anyone else?

Scargill was denounced for his supposedly hysterical claims that the government was determined to destroy the mining industry. Today, virtually nothing remains of it. As even Thatcher’s lieutenant, Norman Tebbit, recently admitted: “Many of these mining communities were completely devastated, with people out of work turning to drugs and no real man’s work because all the jobs had gone.

There is no doubt that this led to a breakdown in these communities with families breaking up and youths going out of control. The scale of the closures went too far”.

The one thing that supporters and opponents agree on is that it taught the unions a lesson they would not forget. It was the turning point for the government. When they beat the miners, they could beat anyone.

Even today, a quarter of a century later, trade union leaders still feel haunted by the strike. Trade union leader Mark Serwotka says that its “legacy was years of despondency and defeatism”. Many miners and their supporters vilified Neil Kinnock for refusing to support the strike.

Today, he sticks to his “plague on both your houses” attitude towards Scargill and Thatcher, but reserves most of his vitriol for the miners’ leadership. But even he is under no illusions as to the consequences, describing it as a “salutary” defeat for the labour movement.

Trade unions “saw that if the Tory government could pulverize the coal mining industry, they could do it to anybody. And that changed the mentality of organised labour, understandably. I couldn’t blame anybody”. He adds:

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“The ambition of the Thatcher government related in some degree to the defeat of Ted Heath. But it had much to do with the determination to put the labour movement in its place. And the obvious way to do that strategically is to take on and defeat the miners.

Because they understood the repercussive effects of defeating the miners would be very substantial in the rest of the labour movement, as it turned out to be”.

To many people at the time, the Miner’s strike looked like the last hurrah of the working class. Their most ferocious plananxes had been crushed and sent back to their pit villages, to face a lingering decline.

It basically meant that people assumed that the old working class no longer had the power, no longer had the clout, which was a huge change in thinking. On the eve of the Thatcherite crusade, half of all workers were trade unionists.

By 1995, the number had fallen to a third. The old industries associated with working-class identity were being destroyed. There no longer seemed anything to celebrate by being working class. But Thatcherism promised an alternative.

Leave the working class behind, it said, and come join the property-owning middle classes instead. Those who failed to do so would have no place in the new Britain. When the newly elected Thatcher government unveiled its Housing Bill in 1979, it could barely contain its excitement.

“This bill lays the foundations for one of the most important social revolutions of the century”, Michael Heseltine claimed triumphantly. At the heart of the legislation was what became known as “right-to-buy”. Council tenants were now able to buy their own homes at knock-down prices.

If you had been a tenant for twenty years, for example, you could have half the market price taken off. One hundred percent mortgages were offered. Home ownership was to be promoted by government like never before.

The policy was undoubtedly popular among many working class people. A million council homes were sold in a decade. By 1985, the Labour Party had dropped its opposition to the policy. Even so, it was not always as voluntary as it sounds.

At the end of the 1980s, the Conservative government introduced legislation that aimed to strnagle councils financially and force them to sell off their housing. Owning a home did not catapult a person into the middle class.

To be paying off a mortgage instead of paying rent did not change the fact that you had to work for a living. But the policy was part and parcel of Thatcher’s determination to make us think of ourselves as individuals who looked after ourselves above all else.

Only that would make people feel responsible for their successes and failures. Thatcherism was fostering a new culture wehre success was measured by what you owned. Those who did not adapt were to be despised. Aspiration was no longer about people working together to improve their communities; it was being redefined as getting more for yourself as an individual, regardless of the social costs.

The social costs were high indeed. The “left-behinds” faced the consequences of official disapproval. Before Thatcher came to power, the average rent of a council tenant was £6.20 a week; a decade later, it was nearly four times higher.

Spending on housing dropped by a stunning 60 percent under Thatcher. But it was to be the next generation that would suffer most. The government prevented councils from builing social housing to replace the stock that was being sold off.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

Housing charity Shelter opposed right-to-buy at the time. “The critical reason was a recognition of the impact that the policy would have over the long term on the availability of social housing stock”, says Shelter’s Mark Thomas.

“The concern was that we’d be selling off these homes at a discount and that the proceeds that were realized wouldn’t actually be reinvested in building replacement homes, and in fact that turned out to be the reality.”

“We’ve only just very recently moved to a situation where we’re building more social homes per year than we’re losing under right-to-buy”. Rising demand for housing pushed prices up, encouraging disastrous house-price bubbles.

Housing became increasingly unaffordable for huge swathes of the population. Millions of people were condemned to languish for years on council housing waiting lists. Little wonder that the number of homeless in Britain soared by 38 percent between 1984 and 1989 alone.

The policy drove a wedge through working-class Britain, creating a divide between homeowners and council tenants. Right-to-buy meant that the best housing stock was sold off; and it was the relatively better-off council tenants who were becoming homeowners.

Those who remained council tenants tended to be poorer and in the worst homes. By 1986, nearly two-thirds of tenants were from the bottom 30 percent in terms of income, and only 18 percent were from the richest half.

Council housing became increasingly reserved for those who were most deprived and vulnerable. It was in the 1980s that council estates got their bad name as dilapidated, crime-ridden, and deeply poor: exaggerations in part - and any elements of truth were the direct result of government policies.

Encouraging home ownership was not the only tool for redefining the idea of aspiration. In Thatcher’s Britain, wealth was to be glorified. The Conservatives promoted the idea that people were rich because of their own hard work and talent, along with the implication that those who did not become so were somehow lacking.

“I believe the person who is prepared to work hardest should get the greatest rewards and keep them after tax, that we should back the workers and not the shirkers”, was Thatcher’s clarion call. The rich were idolized like never before, not least the City men.

The so called Big-Bang, or deregulation of financial services, not only made Britain even more dependent on the City: it also turned spivs and speculators into heroes. “Every man is a capitalist”, declared Thatcher - an unattainable goal, but it showed the route that people were now expected to march along.

For the first time in generations, it was a blatant government aim to shovel as much money in the direction of the rich as possible. In the first budget, top bracket taxes of 83 percent on earned income and 98 percent on unearned income were slashed to 60 percent, and corporation tax went from 52 to 35 per cent.

In 1988 the then-chancellor Nigel Lawson went even further: the top rate of tax was reduced to 40 percent. Geoffrey Howe is unrepentant about what he calls “changing the tax structure to make it incentivized and not obstructive to enterprise.”

Yet the reality of this part of Thatcher’s class war is that it shifted the tax burden from the rich to everybody else. “Whether or not it had the right impact on distribution of wealth or income, I can’t tell”, Howe says.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“But it certainly did liberalize, enhance the chances of making money, saving money, expanding business...” As Howe put it, the Conservatives had to “find the resources with which to reduce the burden of direct taxes”. So they put up VAT, a tax on consumer goods.

The poorer you are, the more of your income goes on VAT. But it was springtime for the rich. By the end of the Tories reign, in 1996, the richest 10 percent of families with three children were over £21,000 a year richer on average than when Thatcher had come to power.

The wealthiest decile’s incomes shot up by 65 percent for each married couple. Their taxes went from half to just above a third of their income. Film director Stephen Frears remembers when Lawson cut the top rate to 40 percent. “It was as if Lord Lawson knocked on my door and said, “well, we’ll give you a cheque for fifty grand!”.

For everyone else, taxes went from 31.1 percent of their income in 1979 to 37.7 percent by the end of 1996, courtesy of the “party of low taxes”. The real income of the poorest tenth collapsed by nearly a fifth after housing costs.

The slice of the nation’s wealth they owned nearly halved. A family with three children in the bottom 10 percent of the population was £625 a year poorer in 1996 than when Thatcher arrived at No. 10. There were five million people in poverty in 1979; by 1992 the number was closer to fourteen million.

And while the top 1 percent saw income growth of just under 4 percent a year under the Conservatives, if you were on a median income it went up by an average of only 1.6 percent. According to Richard Murphy, a chartered accountant and leading tax specialist, “Thatcher shifted the burden of taxation from those who were best off in society to those who were least well-off in society.”

Her philosophy was, those who were at the top of the pile generated the wealth that she wanted created; she viewed the rest as the also-rans, and it didn’t matter. The tax system had been reconfigured to reflect people’s supposed worth.

How could a government-backed wealth grab by the rich be justified? Thatcherites talked about trickle-down, as if the growing wealth sloshing around at the top would eventually drip down to the bottom. But this clearly was not happening. So, instead, Thatcherism attacked the victims of its failed economic policies. If they were suffering, then it must be their own fault.

At the centre of Thatcher’s philosophy was the idea that poverty really did not exist. If people were poor, it was because of their own personal failings. “Nowadays there really is no primary poverty left in this country”, she once said. All right, there may be poverty because they don’t know how to budget but now you are left with the really hard fundamental personality defect”.

At the 1981 Conservative Party Conference, Norman Tebbit famously said that his father ‘got on his bike and looked for work, and he went on looking until he found it”. Now that industrial Britain was in meltdown, this was what the swelling ranks of the unemployed were supposed to do.

“Get on your bike” became the national cliché, summing up Thatcherism in a nutshell: the unemployed must take personal responsibility for the problems that the government had foisted upon them. In line with this thinking, unemployment benefits were cut and no longer rose with people’s earnings.

That government policies had landed people in this situation did not even get a hearing. The irony, of course, was that when workers fought for their jobs - as the miners had - they were demonized even more.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The Conservatives remain prone to launching regular broadsides against so-called welfare dependency. But it was under Thatcher that public spending on benefits soared to historically unprecedented levels - because of the permanent loss of secure jobs in the old industrial heartlands.

Thatcher robustly defended herself against accusations that her policies were responsible. When it came to people on welfare, she proclaimed, their “poverty is not material but behavioral”. She even insisted that “welfare dependence is the classic manifestation of a still-too-socialist society”.

Perhaps, then, Thatcher brought the country closer to socialism than has previously been recognized. The explosion of crime was another striking example of how Thatcherite ideology worked in practice. The British Crime Survey, launched in 1981 to gauge the level of violent crime, reported just over two million incidents at its inception.

By the end of Conservative rule, the rate had doubled. The areas hardest hit were poorer communities where jobs had vanished. The link between crime and the social damage wrought by mass unemployment and poverty was indisputable - except for people like Thatcher:

“It is often said and I have had it said to me in the House that unemployment is the cause of crime. I have said: NO, it most certainly is not”. Thatcher was determined to deal with the symptoms of her scorched-earth economic policies, not the causes.

The Criminal Justice Bill in 1986, which provided for longer sentences and limited defense challenges to jurors, appealed to a popular fantasy that the solution to crime was simply to lock up more criminals. In the same year, the Public Order Act granted the police sweeping new powers.

Thatcherism’s attitude was that crime was an individual choice, not one of the many social ills that thrive in shattered communities. The attitude to drug users was much the same. The number of registered drug addicts soared under Tory rule: from less than 3,000 in 1980 to 43,000 by 1996.

In contrast to the predominantly middle-class drug misusers of the 1960s, the addict of the 1980s was young, often out of work, single, with few or no qualifications and living in deprived areas. Drugs specialist Dr Julian Buchanan found de-industrialization to be a root cause as opportunities for unskilled young people disappeared:

“For the first time, drug-taking became associated with working-class youth living in disaffected and isolated communities”.

Martin Barnes, chief executive of DrugScope, has no doubt that the collapse of the old industries is in large part to blame. “I’m old enough to remember the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s, and they ripped the guts out of a lot of communities, and families and individuals”, he says.

“With communities and families and individuals impacted by unemployment, it wasn’t just that they lost their jobs, it wasn’t just the communities being impacted by the businesses moving out. It was also that their incomes were simply inadequate.

If you can buy some heroin or pinch some stuff to buy it - the first time you take it, the experience is apparently almost indescribable, you couldn’t imagine how good it feels. Is it any wonder then that’s what some people used to feel better?”.

But Thatcher’s response was to declare “we are at war against drugs”. By 1995, nearly a hundred thousand people were being charged with drug-related offences, around four times more than just a decade previously.

Other vulnerable working-class groups faced attack. Single parents, who largely lived in poverty, were characterized as feckless, benefit-addicted and work-shy. By 1991, there were twice as many as there had been just twenty years ago.

The increase had been greater in poorer areas, particularly those hardest hit by unemployment. But there was no sympathy for often desperately poor women struggling to raise a child alone. When Peter Lilley, then Cabinet minister in charge of Social Security, attacked single mothers in a speech at the 1992 Conservative Party Conference, he was merely articulating years of prejudice against them.

To the tune of a song by Gilbert and Sullivan, he sang: "I've got a little list, I've got a little list of young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing list". It had got to the point where government ministers were singing songs on public platforms to taunt poor people who were utterly voiceless. This was Thatcherism at its basest.

Did this bile go down well with some working-class people? Undoubtedly it did, and it became a fixture of politics to play groups of working-class people against each other. Thatcherism aimed to separate the working-class communities most ravaged by the excesses of Thatcherism from everybody else.

This was old-fashioned divide and rule, as practised by the conquerors throughout the ages. Those working-class communities that suffered most from Thatcher's ruinous class war were now herded into an "underclass" whose poverty was supposedly self-inflicted.

All this hammering of working-class culture, communities and identity would have lethal consequences. Football had long been the key leisure interest of working-class people. Football fans had become demonized as hooligans and thugs because of the actions of a small, violent minority.

The manner in which working class people had become not just demonized, but even dehumanized, had a stomach-churning role in the worst tragedy in the history of British football: the 1989 Hillsborough Disaster.

The subsequent inquiry held by Justice Taylor found that, rather than being a disaster caused by fans, the key factor was "a failure of police control". But the police had no intention of accepting responsibility.

So, instead, they attacked the victims. A black propaganda unit was set up by police officers to encourage the idea fans were responsible: it was effective for some and only belatedly combatted in the mainstream by the likes of Jimmy McGovern's award-winning dramatic reconstruction in 1996.

On the Wednesday after the tragedy, the Sun newspaper launched a savage attack on the victims on the basis of lies circulated by the police. Fans picked the pockets of the dead and dying, it claimed. Police officers, fire fighters and ambulance crew were attacked by hooligans.

Liverpool supporters urinated on the bodies of the dead. A police officer giving the kiss of life was beaten up, and other lurid made-up claims. Even today, the Sun remains widely boycotted in Merseyside, despite an apology for these lies fifteen years after the issue was published.

In a decade of attacking and denigrating working-class Britain, Hillsborough plumbed new depths. It is routinely claimed that Thatcher won record working-class support because of council house sales and populist law-and-order policies.

It is true that such measures did push some working-class voters into the Tory-fold, particularly in the South of the country. And yet the reality is that Thatcher came to power in 1979 with a smaller share of the vote than any winning party since World War 2.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

It was the defection of Liberal voters to the Conservative camp that had enabled Thatcher's victory. Thatcher never won the support of more than a third of eligible voters. Indeed, Thatcher sank to third place in some opinion polls during the first phase of her premiership.

Then the Argentinean military junta came to her rescue. When they invaded the Falklands in 1982, barely anyone had even heard of the islands: but British victory in the war led to a wave of patriotic fervour.

Even so, that was far from the most important reason she triumphantly returned to Downing street in 1983, in spite of her ruinous policies. As Labour shifted to the left following Thatcher's victory, the party split, with the right forming the Social Democratic Party and making an Alliance with the Liberals.

Reflecting on the catastrophe of 1983, Michael Foot believed that "the main reason was the breakaway of the so-called social Democrats. Their treachery brought the country Thatcherism". Thatcher had lost half a million votes since 1979, but her fragmenting opposition allowed the Tories to come through the middle in constituencies across the country, giving her a landslide.

Labour maintained its lead among unskilled working-class voters even in the ill-fated election of 1983. Among skilled and semi-skilled working-class voters, however, it did not regain its lead over the Tories until 1992 - when almost all of those who were Alliance voters returned to their old political home.

If Thatcher kept winning, it was primarily because the 60 percent of skilled and semi-skilled workers who voted against her were hopelessly split. Yet Labour's repeated drubbing has consequences of its own. The idea that Labour gave a voice to working-class people, that it championed their interests, was severely weakened during the 1980s.

On issue after issue, Labour under Kinnock capitulated to Thatcher's free-market policies. Any who resisted were sidelined. Above all, though, it was the party's acute demoralization in the face of Thatcherite triumphalism that paved the way to this surrender.

For example, when I asked Kinnock how he managed to win what he called his "tussle" with the unions to make them accept that Labour would not reverse Thatcher's union laws, he replied: "It was made easier by the defeat, the size of the defeat in 1987, and the way in which I was determined to exploit that."

Even before the advent of New Labour, Thatcherism had ensured that the working class would be bereft of political champions. "The real triumph was to have transformed not just one party, but two", as Howe later put it.

In only a decade or so, Thatcherism had completely changed how class was seen. The wealthy were adulated. All were now encouraged to scramble up the social ladder, and be defined by how much they owned. Those who were poor or unemployed had no one to blame but themselves.

The traditional pillars of working-class Britain had been smashed to the ground. To be working class was no longer something to be proud of, never mind to celebrate. Old working-class values, like solidarity, were replaced by dog-eat-dog individualism.

No longer could working-class people count on politicians to fight their corner. The new Briton created by Thatcherism was a property-owning, middle class individual who looked after themselves, their family and no one else.

Aspiration meant yearning for a bigger car or a bigger house. As miners' leader Chris Kitchen put it: "Forget the community spirit and all that. If you can't make a profit, then it has to be stopped. That's always what Thatcher's ethos was about".

Those working-class communities who had been most shattered by Thatcherism became the most disparaged. They were seen as the left-behinds, the remnants of an old world that had been trampled on by the inevitable march of history.

There was to be no sympathy for them: on the contrary, they deserved to be caricatured and reviled. There was a time when working-class people had been patronized rather than openly despised. "Salt of the earth" was another phrase once associated with them.

Today, they are more likely than not to be called chavs. From salt of the earth to scum of the earth. This is the legacy of Thatcherism - the demonization of everything associated with the working class.

Politicians versus Chavs

Polly Toynbee wrote "Now the working classes are no longer feared as a political peril they no longer need respect, and the uppers can revel in their superiority as if this were the eighteenth century".

David Cameron was more interested in reinforcing middle-class prejudice than in boosting the Tory vote. "We talk about people being at risk of poverty, or social exclusion: it's as if these things - obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction - are purely external events, like a plague or bad weather.

Of course, circumstances - where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school and the choices your parents make - have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices people make".

With the help of Tory briefings, newspapers left their readers in no doubt as to what Cameron was getting at. "David Cameron tells the fat and the poor: take responsibility", as the Times put it. "Fat or poor? It's probably your own fault, Cameron declares", was how the evidently delighted Daily Mail reacted.

Cameron was tapping into sentiments that Thatcherism had made respectable: the idea that, more often than not, less fortunate people had only themselves to blame. Glasgow's working class had actually suffered from what David Cameron so breezily dismissed as "external events": the collapse of British industry.

The Tory leader was asking people to take responsibility for what happened when these jobs disappeared. The steelworks, which employed 30,000, had been the first to go; then the Templeton carpet factory; and finally, Arrol's engineering works.

Many smaller industries and suppliers dependent on these industrial hubs had disappeared along with them. But Cameron made no mention of these inconvenient truths; instead he resorted to criticizing the victims.

What made David Cameron's speech all the more remarkable is his own ultra-privileged background. There is no evidence that he has ever had any real contact with the people he was haranguing. Unlike the average Glaswegian, he owes everything to his family's wealth, power and connections.

"My father was a stockbroker, my grandfather was a stockbroker, my great-grand father was a stockbroker", as he once boasted to a gathering of City types. As a boy, Cameron attended Heatherdown Preparatory School in Berkshire, which counts Princes Andrew and Edward among its former pupils.

It is well known that he spent his teenage years at Eton College, the traditional training ground of Britain's ruling elite. But before Cameron had even started university, he worked as an adolescent parliamentary researcher for his godfather, the Tory MP Tim Rathbone.

A few months later, after his father pulled a few strings, Cameron went to Hong Kong to work for a multinational corporation. Following his graduation from Oxford University, where he was a member of the infamous toffs' drinking society the Bullingdon Club, he was parachuted into a job at Conservative Central Office.

When Cameron left Central Office a few years later, his rarefied circle helped yet again to push him up the ladder. There is one trait that Cameron shares with working-class people in Glasgow. He, like them, is a prisoner of his background.

It was not inevitable that he would become prime minister, but whatever happened, it was pretty certain that he would die as he was born: in the lap of wealth and privilege. For hundreds of thousands of Glaswegians, it is equally likely that they will grow up with the same risks of poverty and unemployment as their parents.

According to one of his old schoolmates, Cameron is an unrepentant social elitist. 52 percent of us believe that "a Conservative Government would mainly represent the interests of the well-off rather than the ordinary people".

It is a sentiment you will often hear expressed in working-class communities. At the centre of Cameron's political philosophy is the idea that a person's chances in life are determined by behavioural factors rather than economic background.

If you think the solution to poverty is parents being nicer to their kids, then why would it matter if you cut people's benefits? No one has endorsed this Cameronian attitude to class inequalities more than former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith.

After Cameron became prime minister, he appointed Duncan Smith as secretary of state for work and pensions - effectively the guardian of the British Welfare State. Through his think-tank, the Centre for Social Justice, Duncan Smith has developed the idea that poverty is not about lacking money: it is due to problems with lack of discipline, family break-up, and substance abuse.

As the darling of Tory grass roots, right-wing conservative MEP Daniel Hannan put it: "It follows that you do not end poverty by giving money to the poor: a theory that British welfarism has amply demonstrated over 60 years".

If you are less well off, then it is your behavior that has to be changed, according to this Tory vision. These ideas are the foundation stones of Cameron's semi-apocalyptic vision of "Broken Britain". Social problems affecting particular poor working-class communities are first exaggerated and then portrayed as representative.

Each time a tragic incident hit the headlines, Cameron seized on it as evidence. For example, the nation was shocked in 2009 by the torture and attempted murder of two little boys, aged nine and eleven, by two other young boys in the former mining village of Edlington in South Yorkshire.

The aggressors had themselves endured years of abuse. But for Cameron, the attacks were proof that the country had collapsed into what he described as a "social recession". On each occasion, "are we just going to say this is an individual case?", Cameron thundered.

Or take the case of thirteen year old Alfie Patten. In early 2009, it was claimed that his girlfriend had conceived when he was aged just twelve. Newspapers splashed pictures of this baby-faced, four-foot-tall alleged father across their front pages.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Iain Duncan Smith could not resist making political capital out of the episode, claiming it underlined the Tories' point about "Broken Britain". "Too many dysfunctional families in Britain today have children growing up where anything goes", he said, warning that the sense of right and wrong was collapsing in some parts of society.

The Tories were strangely silent when, in the end, it turned out that Alfie was not the father at all. But the Tories are quick to cultivate middle-class fears of rampaging hordes of state-subsidized barbarians just outside the gates.

In their effort to create caricatures of depraved working-class communities, the Tories were not above citing blatantly false information. In a propaganda leaflet entitled Labour's Two Nations published in early 2010, they released some astounding figures that suggested a teenage pregnancy pandemic was sweeping through Britain's poor communities.

The document repeatedly affirmed that women under the age of eighteen were "three times more likely to be pregnant in the most deprived areas compared to the least deprived areas. IN the most deprived areas 54 percent are likely to fall pregnant before the age of 18.

It turned out the Tories had put the decimal points in the wrong place, making figures wrong by a multiple of ten. The real figures for the ten most deprived areas were actually just 5.4 percent. The document also failed to mention a decline in under-eighteen conceptions of over 10 percent in these areas - reversing a trend that had been going up under previous Tory governments.

What the Tories are doing is placing the chav myth at the heart of British politics, so as to entrench the idea that there are entire communities around Britain crawling with feckless, delinquent, violent and sexually debauched no-hopers.

Middle England on the one hand and Chavs on the other. While the government was cutting jobs and help for those without work, Duncan Smith suggested that council tenants could be taken out of unemployment blackspots and relocated, hundreds of miles away if necessary.

Millions were "trapped in estates where there is no work", he lamented without suggesting that the government might consider bringing jobs to these areas. The message was clear: these were communities without hope or a future, and nothing could be done to save them.

As the pro-Conservative Telegraph newspaper put it, the parallels with Norman Tebbit's 1981 call for the unemployed to "get on your bike" were uncanny. Many of the Tories' ideas about social inequality - such as blaming people for their circumstances - have a firmly Thatcherite pedigree.

But they can also be traced back to a right-wing pseudo-political scientist, the American Charles Murray. Murray is perhaps most famous for his controversial 1994 book *The Bell Curve*, which he suggested that inherent racial differences had an impact on IQ levels.

Like today's Tories, Murray claimed that family breakdown had triggered the rise of an "underclass" in British society. He argued "that the family in the dominant economic class - call it the upper class - is in better shape than most people think, and is likely to get better.

Meanwhile, deterioration is likely to continue in the lower classes. Rising illegitimacy in the "lower classes" had produced what Murray called the "new rabble", marked by growing crime, "dropout from work", child-neglect and so on...

One of the solutions, Murray argued, was for childbearing to entail "economic penalties for a single woman. It is all horribly sexist, I know. It also happens to be true", he said. David Davis is certainly no more sympathetic towards the plight of the working class than other Tories.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“There have been a couple of television programmes recently. One in which they went down to what in the old days would have been called a dole queue and said ‘Would you like a job?’. Chap said yes, and was told: ‘It’s picking squash on a farm’. They won’t do that, you know.

Davis is quite keen to contrast what he depicts as the unmotivated British worker with ‘the large number of immigrants who’ve probably got a stronger work ethic’. What struck me was his willingness to make an intellectual argument in defence of inequality:

“I wouldn’t try to do anything about correcting inequalities”, he explained, “because the inequalities are widened by people getting richer, not by the poor getting poor. And frankly, so long as they generate wealth for the economy, so long as they generate tax income and so on, then I’m comfortable with it”.

I pointed out the recent groundbreaking research by academics in the book, *The Spirit Level*. They used irrefutable statistics to show that the more unequal a society is, the more social problems it has - like crime and poor health for example.

In other words, more equal societies were a happier societies. David Davis gave the book short shrift. “It’s bullshit”, he said. “I think it’s one of these fashionable stupid ideas. It’s easy to sell a book, But I don’t think it stands up”.

In political historian Ross McKibbin’s opinion, the Tories are “there to defend inequality, always have been. It’s like all conservative parties anywhere - they’re designed to defend inequality and social privilege”.

Davis is, in effect, celebrating inequality as a good thing. The Tory demonization of working-class communities must be seen in this light. It is difficult to justify a grossly uneven distribution of wealth on the grounds of fairness.

But what if the people at the top are entitled to be there because of their entrepreneurial flair, while those at the bottom are deeply flawed and so deserve what they get? Davis’s attitude toward the British working-class is shaped by the idea that people’s lot in life is determined by their personal characteristics.

The crux of his argument is that they don’t work as hard as workers from other countries - which, he says, partly explains issues like unemployment. Criticizing working-class people is politically useful for a Conservative-led government determined to drive through cuts that will disproportionately hurt the same group.

Some of the first programmes to face the axe after the 2010 general election included free school meals and help for the young unemployed. When Tory minister Bob Neill was asked why northern cities were losing millions of pounds compared to southern cities, his shameless response was: “Those in greatest need ultimately bear the burden of paying off the debt”.

So much for the Tories: after all, most of their leading lights were born into privilege and are ideologically committed to defending grossly uneven distributions in wealth and power. Labour governments introduced all of the major reforms of the post-war period that have improved the lot of the working class, from the NHS to worker’s rights.

The tragedy is that New Labour bears much of the responsibility for the negative light in which the working class is now seen. One of the big reasons why Labour lost the 2010 election was because it lost touch with its working-class base.

There was a growing contempt for the working class, not just among parties of the Right, but also among parties of the Left. That’s a really big part of what’s changed Britain in the last thirty years. Former prime minister James Callaghan was a classic example of Old Labour: a working-class politician whose

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

power base was the trade unions. Old Labour still celebrated, or at least paid tribute to, working class identity.

Although Callaghan was on what was then the right of the party, he still felt obliged to couch policies in class terms. That is not to deny Old Labour's flaws. It was top-down and bureaucratic, and its celebration of working-class identity did not adapt to the entry of women and technic minorities into the workforce.

Yet Old Labour remained committed to the idea of raising the conditions of the working class as a class, even if this sometimes amounted to mere lip service. In contrast, New Labour's philosophy is not rooted in improving the lot of the working class, it is about escaping the working class.

Labour was very open about this project. For example, Gordon Brown fought the 2010 general election on creating 'a bigger middle class than ever before'. The 'non-aspirational working class' had no place in New Labour.

They were ignored on the grounds that they had nowhere else to go, and in any case, were less likely to vote. But what did New Labour mean by aspiration? You aspire to own more material things. Real aspiration means much more than simple self-enrichment.

In New Labour's eyes, being aspirational working class meant embracing individualism and selfishness. It meant fighting to be part of Brown's "bigger middle class than ever". The problem is that the people in the working class have been sold the line that they shouldn't be there, and they have to somehow drag themselves up. The old socialist motto is "rise with your class, not above it". The reality of Britain is that to rise, you rise above your class.

What the Blairites patronizingly called "non-aspirational" is those people who still had a sense of community and still recognized that the whole community does better together or they all do badly together.

The non-aspirational working class are, as their label suggests, frowned upon: because they have failed to jump on the Thatcherite, property-owning, endlessly acquisitive bandwagon. According to the New Labor lexicon, only self-enrichment counts as aspiration.

Unless you are prepared to climb up the class ladder, you are devoid of aspiration. It is not just adults who are lumped into the non-aspirational category. New Labour politicians frequently diagnose a 'poverty of aspiration' in working-class kids to explain things like poor school results or why poverty is transmitted from generation to generation.

It is not the lack of jobs and apprenticeships following the collapse of industry that is to blame, but rather the attitudes of working-class children. In this spirit, a government report published in December 2008 highlighted the alleged 'under-ambition' of working class people living in the old industrial heartlands.

The question of what these kids are supposed to aspire to in areas lacking well-paid jobs is never addressed. But this approach was fully in the Thatcherite mould: that responsibility for the social problems facing working-class people should be placed squarely on their shoulders.

The notion of 'aspirational' versus 'non-aspirational' was just one way that New Labour attempted to exploit fissures in the working class that had emerged under Thatcherism. Another was to win the support of what New Labour politicians called "hard-working families" as opposed to millions of supposedly idle people dishonestly claiming benefits.

It is true that bashing "welfare scroungers" may be more likely to attract the support of low-paid workers than a millionaire. After all, if you work hard for a pittance, why wouldn't you resent the idea of people living a life of luxury at your expense?

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The reality is that attacks on welfare have been directed at the working-class communities most devastated by the collapse of industry. The old industrial heartlands contain the highest levels of people without work and dependent on benefits.

The root cause is a lack of secure jobs to replace the ones that disappeared. As Iain Duncan Smith has admitted, rather than creating new jobs, successive governments encouraged unemployed people to claim disability benefits, in order to massage the employment figures.

New Labour's approach was to stigmatize and demonize vulnerable working-class people. The then-government's welfare advisor David Freud, who appropriately enough, later defected to the Tories, claimed in 2008 that two million people should be pushed off benefits into work. And yet the government claimed at the time that there were only half a million job vacancies.

"I mean, that was a figure that David Freud just kind of plucked out of the air", admits his former boss, James Purnell. That £16 million worth of benefits were in fact going unclaimed each year went unmentioned.

So did the fact that the majority in overtly were in work. Purnell was presenting work as an automatic gateway out of poverty but, in low-pay Britain, that's hardly the case. One of Purnell's proposals was that people could be made to work in exchange for benefits.

Given that Jobseeker's Allowance at the time was worth only £60.50, if you were made to work a forty-hour week, for example, you would end up being paid just £1.50 an hour. Those unlucky enough to find themselves in the most devastated communities were not only accused of 'playing the system'. They faced being made to work for a fraction of the minimum wage.

There were more people on benefits in certain communities because all the old industrial jobs had vanished, leaving only scarce, low-paid, insecure service sector jobs. It is safe to say that Mark Serwotka is not a fan of Purnell.

Serwotka is the leader of the 300,000-strong civil service union - the Public and Commercial Services union. Agitated to even hear his name, he described Purnell as "the worst social security secretary in the history of this country" and "a shameful man who professes to be a Labour politician".

He was particularly angered by Purnell's attitude to places like Merthyr, where Serwotka grew up. Recently, Hoover had closed its factory there after sixty-one years of providing work for the community.

"There's no mines, there's no pits, there's real deprivation - and Purnell essentially says: "You're not trying hard enough to get work, and therefore we need sanctions to force people into work". Serwotka repeatedly clashed with Purnell when he was in office.

As Serwotka says, the "absurdity" of the whole policy is that it was "the same for the whole country, as if the labour market in the South East was the same as the labour market in the South Wales Valley, and clearly it's not.

But if you introduce the same policy, what you do is stigmatize the areas where there's no work". The "welfare reform" programme fuelled still further the demonization of the poorest working-class communities.

It magnified the problems it purported to address and failed to explain the real reasons behind them. It also cleared the ground for the Tories - who went out of their way to praise James Purnell and his welfare policies - to go even further after they formed a government in May 2010.

New Labour, through programmes like its welfare reform, propagated the chav caricature by spreading the idea that people are poor because they lack moral fibre. Surveys show that attitudes towards poverty are currently harder than they were under Thatcher.

If people observe that even Labour holds the less fortunate to be personally responsible for their fate, why should they think any different? No wonder the image of communities teeming with feckless chavs has become so ingrained in recent years.

This spectre of the “mob at the gates” conjured up by Jon Cruddas has heavily featured in the government’s crackdown on anti-social behaviour. Again, huge numbers of working-class people support action to combat anti-social behaviour.

It is, after all, more likely to affect someone living on a council estate than a professional out in the suburbs, and has a real impact on the quality of people’s lives. But the government’s response has been to stigmatize working-class youth rather than address the root causes.

Take Anti-Social Behavior Orders, ASBOs, introduced under New Labour but now facing abolition under the Conservative-led government. They could be imposed for minor incidents and restrict the individual’s behaviour in various ways: like banning them from a street, or forbidding them from swearing.

If the ASBO was violated, the culprit could be sent to prison for up to five years. Originally, New Labour promised that under-eighteens would only have ASBOs served under exceptional circumstances but, as it turned out, year on year around half were imposed on the young.

Overwhelmingly, those on the receiving end were both poor and working class. In one case, a child with Tourette’s was given an ASBO for his compulsive swearing. Whether or not you agree with ASBOs, it is difficult to deny that they have increased the bad reputation of young working-class kids and popularized the chav caricature.

Even New Labour’s own youth justice “tzar”, Professor Rod Morgan, criticized the measures for demonizing a whole section of British youth and criminalizing them for offences that once would have been regarded as “high jinks”.

ASBOs add up to create a cumulative vision of a Britain full of jobs, with crack houses on every inner-city estate; drunken youths running amok in provincial towns, and so on. Taken together, New Labour policies helped to build a series of overlapping chav caricatures: the feckless, the non-aspirational, the scrounger, the dysfunctional and the disorderly.

To hear this sort of rhetoric from Labour, rather than the Tories, has confirmed the stereotypes and prejudices many middle-class people have about working class communities and individuals. But it can be far subtler than outright attacks.

Many of New Labour’s underlying philosophies were steeped in middle-class triumphalism. They were based on the assumption that the tattered remnants of the working class are on the wrong side of history - and must be made to join “Middle England” like the rest of us.

“The new Britain is a meritocracy”, declared Tony Blair upon assuming office in 1997. If New Labour had an official religion, it would surely be meritocracy. But there is a dark irony in how celebrated this concept became.

“Meritocracy” was not originally intended to describe a desirable society - far from it. It was meant to raise the alarm at what Britain could become. Michael Young, who penned Labour’s 1945 Manifesto, coined the phrase in his 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

As he later explained, this was “a satire meant to be a warning against what might happen to Britain between 1958 and the imagined final revolt against the meritocracy in 2003”. He warned that its consequences would mean “that the poor and the disadvantaged would be done down, and in fact they have been... It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none”.

In a meritocracy, those who possess the most “talent” will rise naturally to the top. Social hierarchy will therefore be arranged according to “merit”. Society would remain unequal, but those inequalities would reflect differences of ability.

To have a genuine meritocracy we’d have to abolish inherited wealth, we’d have to abolish private schools and we’re so far away from having that. Of course, New Labour never had any intention of abolishing inherited wealth or private education.

It argued for “meritocracy” within a society rigged in favour of the middle class. Meritocracy ends up becoming a rubber stamp for existing inequalities, re-branding them as deserved. Meritocracy can end up being used to argue that those at the top are there because they deserve to be, while those at the bottom are simply not talented enough and likewise deserve their place.

It is used in education to belittle vocational subjects in favour of the academic. Does a multi-millionaire advertising consultant deserve to be above a hospital cleaner in the pecking order of things? The natural companion to meritocracy is “social mobility”, which New Labour put at the heart of its 2010 general election campaign.

Rather than improve the conditions of the working class as a whole, social mobility is offered as a means of creaming off a minority of working-class individuals and parachuting them into the middle class. It underlines the notion that being working class is something to get away from.

It does not mean abolishing or even eroding classes, but just making it easier for individuals to move between them. It would not have any impact on the conditions of the majority of working-class people. Social mobility can mean offering an escape route from poverty, rather than attempting to abolish poverty.

The reason why there’s been all the emphasis on social mobility is that all the political parties prefer to talk about social mobility and equality of opportunity rather than equality of conditions. If the officially sanctioned route to improving your lot in life is to become middle class, what about the people left behind?

Clearly not everyone can become a middle-class professional or businessperson: the majority of people still have to do the working-class jobs in offices and shops that society needs to keep ticking. By putting the emphasis on escaping these jobs rather than improving their conditions, we end up disqualifying those who remain in them.

We frown upon the supermarket checkout staff, the cleaners, the factory workers - slackers who failed to climb the ladder offered by social mobility. Another way that New Labour skirted the issue of inequality was by following in Thatcher’s footsteps and pretending that class no longer existed.

At the end of the 1990s, the government appointed a committee to revisit the official social classification used for national statistics. It illustrated New Labour’s dogged determination to scrub class from the country’s vocabulary.

With “class” no longer an option to describe inequality and disadvantage in society, New Labour invented new terms. “Social exclusion” and the “socially excluded” was the code for “poverty” and “the poor”. The term stripped away the more unpleasant connotations of poverty, like poor housing, low pay and so on.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

In essence it was a less pejorative way of saying “underclass”, with the same implications of a group of people who had been cut off from society. It was the New Labour take on the chav phenomenon: a dysfunctional, excluded group at the bottom, and then the happy rest of us.

In a society that’s as stratified and unequal as ours, there is no mainstream. Again, it was this new Labour thing, they wanted to do something about the very bottom, and then pretend that apart from that, there wasn’t a problem.

But that’s wrong! The socially excluded is largely made up of people who are the most disadvantaged within the working class. “Exclusion” did not have to mean being excluded by society – but rather being excluded by your own actions.

Politicians of all colours have a vested interest in denying the existence of class. It has proved effective in avoiding having to address working-class concerns in favour of a small, privileged layer of the middle classes.

Working class voters were taken for granted as the “core vote” who had nowhere else to go, allowing New Labour politicians to tailor their policies to privileged voters. No New Labour politician personified this attitude more than Tony Blair.

The near-obsession with ignoring working-class voters meant inflating the importance of a very small tranche of wealthy voters who were misleadingly construed as Middle England. After all, an individual in the very middle of the nation’s income scale only earns around £21,000.

This distortion sometimes reached absurd levels. As Matthew Taylor said: “There’s a particular strand of uber-Blairism which basically is kind of just fucking mad”. It is not just the fetishizing of the demands of the wealthy and powerful that has rendered the working class invisible. The promotion of multiculturalism in an era when the concept of class was being abandoned meant that inequality became almost exclusively understood through the prism of race and ethnic identity.

While the struggle for class equality was said to have either been squashed or won, depending on your perspective, the battle for racial equality continued through multiculturalism. This saw Asian and Black people struggling for greater ethnic and cultural respect and this has been a fantastic resistance movement.

But because multiculturalism became the only recognised platform to the struggle for equality, we fail to acknowledge the existence of a multi-racial working class and the white working class is forced to think of themselves as a new ethnic group with their own distinctive culture.

Most dangerously of all, middle-class people have ended up refusing to acknowledge anything about white working class as legitimately cultural, which leads to a composite loss of respect on all fronts: economic, social and political.

White working-class people living on estates sometimes just don’t feel anyone is listening or speaking up for them, as Hazel Blears put it in 2009. Blears was absolutely correct: millions of white working-class people did feel unrepresented and voiceless. But for Blears, their concerns were almost entirely defined by immigration.

Only when the BNP was breathing down its neck did New Labour start talking about the working class again – and even then it was in a racialized form, and restricted to the immigration issue. Overwhelmingly from middle-class, professional backgrounds, the combined salary and expenses of the average backbencher comfortably puts them in the top 4 percent of the population.

At the service of MPs and hacks alike are the cleaners and catering staff. Many of them trek across London on night buses to arrive in the House at the crack of dawn. Their wages place them easily in the bottom 10 percent of the population.

Until a fight for a living wage was successful in 2006, the cleaners were subsisting on the minimum wage in one of the most expensive cities on the planet. Watching middle-aged women trundling around trolleys containing the leftovers of roast chicken and chocolate gateaux, you could be forgiven for feeling as though you had walked into a Victorian aristocrat's manor.

It would be easy, but lazy, to portray Parliament as a microcosm of the British class system. It isn't, but it certainly showcases the gaping divides of modern society. Politics has increasingly been turned into a career rather than a service.

You do not have to agree with his politics to flinch at the class-based ridicule heaped on John Prescott. The son of a railway signalman, Prescott went on to fail his eleven-plus and became a waiter in the Merchant Navy.

His impressive rise from such roots to the post of deputy prime minister was rarely applauded, however. Tory MP Nicholas Soames, a grandson of Winston Churchill, used to shout drinks orders at him in the House of Commons whenever he rose to speak.

Tory MPs and journalists who have benefited from hugely expensive private educations mocked his occasionally garbled English. Prescott was ridiculed because some felt that by being from lowly working-class stock, he sullied the office of deputy prime minister and then the House of Lords.

Working class people once rose in politics through the mighty institutions of trade unions and local government. But today the trade unions are on their knees and local government has been stripped of many of its powers.

You are more likely to make it to Parliament if you are a middle-class Oxbridge-educated former special advisor these days. When I spoke to Peter, a leisure centre worker in East London, he summed up the scepticism many working class people feel towards the political establishment:

"I think they're on a different wavelength. I think most of the politicians are very rich and don't understand the normal problems of people, because they come from a different background. And, y'know, you see them all on television, most of them are very wealthy, so they wouldn't understand our problems".

It was his firm belief that "they would never know what normal people go through". This is a fundamental point in understanding politicians' demonization of working class communities. It is of course largely down to the legacy of Thatcher's assault on working-class Britain, and the establishment of a consensus that individual salvation can only be achieved through joining the middle class.

This consensus has established itself so easily in Westminster because our increasingly privileged political elites are fertile ground for these kinds of ideas. They are largely disconnected from working-class communities, and cannot imagine anyone not sharing their middle-class values and aspirations.

They find it easy to explain working-class problems as the consequences of personal behaviour, not the social structure of the country. Above all, stereotypes about the working class have found a sympathetic hearing from overwhelmingly middle-class politicians who have rarely mixed with people with less privileged backgrounds.

The shadow of Thatcher's class war and the demonizing of working class communities by both the Tories and New Labour have had drastic consequences. Political trends always exert a profound influence on the culture.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The repercussions of the attack on working-class values and institutions have fanned out through society. Like Westminster, our media and entertainment are dominated by the most privileged sectors. They have been all too ready to put working-class people down in the crudest possible ways.

4. A Class in the Stocks

There has never been an age when the working class were properly respected, let alone glorified. From the Victorian era to World War 2, working-class people were barely mentioned in books. When they appeared at all, they were caricatures.

George Orwell observed: “If you look for the working classes in fiction, and especially English fiction, all you find is a hole... the ordinary town proletariat, the people who make the wheels go round, have always been ignored by novelists. When they do find their way between the corners of a book, it is nearly always as objects of pity or as comic relief”.

And yet things did change after World War 2. Labour, the party created by working-class people to represent them in Parliament, had won a landslide victory and was there to stay as one of the country's two major political forces. Sweeping social reforms were introduced to address working-class concerns.

Trade unions enjoyed influence at the highest levels of power. Working-class people could no longer be ignored. “The war changed everything”, says Stephen Frears, a film director. “Novels started being about the working classes. Plays started being about the working classes.

“There was suddenly a whole group of people who'd never been heard before. The focus before had been on such a narrow range of subjects in Britain, which was those who live the life of the upper classes or middle classes, whatever. So suddenly the world became more interesting”.

Although there had been fleeting Television programmes with working-class main characters before, *Coronation Street* was the first in which working-class people and their lives were the central focus, and with their lives portrayed in a sympathetic fashion.

While working-class people were the stars of favourites such as *The Likely Lads*, it was middle-class people who could find themselves the butt of jokes in *The Good Life* and other series. There was even a popular sitcom in the 1970s - *The Rag Trade* - about female trade unionists who took on their bosses and always won.

As late as the 1980s there were classic Television shows being written around likeable working-class characters, such as *Only Fools and Horses*. That is not to say that the portrayal of working-class life was always completely realistic.

Films often portrayed the working class as sort of buffoons, but not as villains or unpleasant. They might be uncouth but nevertheless not bad people. There was a big leap from being patronized to being despised. The shift would come with the advent of Thatcherism and its assault on what you could call working-classness - working class values, institutions, industries and communities.

From about the 80s, it became possible in the media to, as it were, disparage the working class... in a disrespectful and wholly unkind way. Among the earliest examples of these sentiments filtering into popular culture were two characters invented by comedian Harry Enfield - Wayne and Wanetta Slob.

First appearing in 1990, they could be regarded as “proto-chavs”: feckless, foul-mouthed, benefit-dependent and filthy. When Wanetta becomes pregnant, for example, the couple debate calling their unborn child “ashtray”.

Even today, the media enthusiastically use Waynetta Slob as a template when attacking groups of working-class people. But it was the emergence of the “chav” phenomenon that brought together previously disparate prejudices against working-class people.

The website “ChavScum” was launched at the end of 2003, with a tagline reading: “Britain’s peasant underclass that is taking over our towns and cities”. In its current incarnation - ChavTowns, contributors compete over attacking chavs: entries can be simple, like “shitty council scum peo;e living in shitty ex-council housing”, for example.

Another targets the chavs of the town of Leek who “spend their days on the checkout at Aldi or working in the delightful Kerrigold cheese factory. The most ambition ever seen in the town made the front page of the Leek Post and Times when one 15 year old mother of 17 made a passing comment about maybe working on the deli counter at Morrisons one day”.

Supermarket employees in Winchester don’t come off much better. According to one account: “Even when they are on the checkout, the customer is always invisible as they chat about pregnancies at fourteen and how ‘Cristal got drunk on Friday night, and went home with Tyrone’”

There are entire books dedicated to this genre. For a long time, Lee Bok’s *The Little Book of Chavs* was perched on the counters of the now defunct bookshop chain Borders. Its most recent edition boasted that it had sold over 100,000 copies and had to be reprinted eight times.

It even contains a list of “chav occupations” to aid identification. If you were a female chav or “chavette”, you would be a trainee hairdresser, a trainee beautician, a cleaner or a barmaid. Chav men work as cowboy builders, roofers or plumbers; they may also be market stall traders, mechanics or security guards.

Both sexes could be spotted at a checkout in low-price supermarket like Lidl or Aldi, or toiling in a fast food restaurant. The equally poisonous follow-up book, *The Chav Guide to Life*, revealed that as well as being “loud and lower class”, “Most Chavs come from not well-off, working-class families on council estates, and get their money from the dole”.

The creators of the ChavScum website published their own literary contribution to chav-hate. In *Chav!: A User’s Guide to Britain’s New Ruling Class*, Mia Wallace and Clint Spanner offer tips for “spotting chavs in the wild”. Chavs, you see, are like animals.

“Cutting edge, fake designer fashion, branded sportswear and accessories to die for, babulously extravagant 9-carat-gold ‘bling’, it’s all here in this fun-for-all-the-family, point-scoring game!”. A Chavette was regarded “as an infertile freak by her immediate community” if she had not had a child before the age of seventeen.

As chav-hate began to emerge as a force in mainstream culture in 2004, it found supporters in the mainstream press, Jemima Lewis, a Telegraph journalist, responded to the ChavScum website with a column entitled “In defence of snobbery”.

Hating the lower orders was good for them, was the crux of her argument: it made them aspire to escape their woeful circumstances and get some manners. For those of its readers who were bewildered by the chav phenomenon, the Daily Mail published a handy “A to Z” of chavs.

“A” was for “A-level” - “something no Chav has ever possessed”. “U” was for “underage”: “What every chavette is at the time of her first sexual experience”. The sexual promiscuity of chav women, one of the big obsessions of chav-haters, is encapsulated in the Mail’s “joke” offering: “What’s the difference between the Grand Old Duke of York and a Chavette? The Grand Old Duke of York only had 10,000 men!.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

And of course, chavs were to be taunted for their low-paid jobs. “What do you say to a chav when he’s at work? Big Mac and fries, please, mate”. Another article by the same journalist suggested that Britain was being overrun by chavs. “Some people call them scum. Sociologists call them the underclass. But call them what you like, they’re taking over the country”.

Those labelled as “chavs” became frequently ridiculed for failing to meet lofty middle-class standards in what they wore, or how they ate. Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver was rightly applauded for his crusade to bring healthy food to the British school dinner menu.

But it was a campaign marred by tut-tutting at the eating habits of the lower orders. On his Channel 4 programme, Oliver referred to parents who failed to sit around a table for dinner as “what we have learned to call ‘white trash’”.

Indeed, his television series Jamie Oliver’s School Dinners focused on poor estates where mothers struggled to feed their kids with what little money they had. Jonathan Ross asked him on BBC 1: “Well, do you ever think that some people shouldn’t be allowed to be parents? Like people from council estates?” It was a “joke” met with cheers.

The same goes for alcohol consumption. As Daily Telegraph journalist James Delingpole argued: “we all know where Britain’s most serious child-drinking problems lie: on sink estates and among broken homes where rudderless urchins are routinely downing alcopops and cans of super-strong lager before they’ve reached their teens”.

However, a study by the National Centre for Social Research found that children from affluent backgrounds were the biggest drinkers, and teenagers with unemployed parents were less likely to have even tried alcohol.

But Delingpole was merely fleshing out the stereotype that, while the middle classes consumed alcohol in a respectable, cultured way, the lower orders spent their time rolling around in a drunken stupor. It was their lifestyles that needed regulating, not those of the civilized middle class.

Middle-class journalists were also affronted by the bad manners of the chavs. So much so, in fact, that they used their well-paid columns to launch snooty attacks against people who lack a platform to defend themselves.

The Daily Telegraph’s Janet Daley has a particular distaste for the unwashed masses. Of particular concern to Daley were the ‘yobs’ who by going on holiday forced her to “flee to those parts of Abroad which the louts ignore”.

What perturbed her most was that these people were “neither poor nor unemployed. Indeed, most of them had the sorts of jobs that would once have been described as ‘respectable working class’”. The truth was that rude working-class people were ruining the holidays of sensitive, superior people like herself.

Daley wanted the middle classes to civilize the lower orders - but they were prevented from doing so. “It is bourgeois guild that prevents those who would impose standards from acting: the socially privileged simply cower and refuse to intervene, for fear of appearing contemptuous of those less fortunate than themselves”.

Manners belonged to the middle classes: and it was high time that they sorted out the impertinent chavs. Not that the born-and-bred middle classes are the only guilty parties. Some who hail from working-class roots and have achieved wealth and success against the odds have told themselves: “If I can make it, then anyone with the talent and determination can too”.

Take John Bird, the founder of the Big Issue. “I’m middle class. I got out of the working class as quickly as I could”, he once said. “The working class is violent and abusive, they beat their wives and I hate their culture”.

John Bird is far from the only example of a wealthy, formerly working-class individual who spits at those they left behind. You have “escaped” purely because of your own exceptional talents and abilities, you can think to yourself - and those who have not got ahead have only themselves to blame.

It would be nice to dismiss chav-hate as a fringe psychosis confined to ranting right-wing columnists. But there is a type of chav-hate that has become a “liberal bigotry”. Liberal bigots justify their prejudice against a group of people on the grounds of their own supposed bigotry.

The racialization of working-class people as “white” has convinced some that they can hate chavs and remain progressive-minded. They justify their hatred of white working-class people by focusing on their supposed racism and failure to assimilate into multicultural society.

“It’s one of the ways people have made their snobbery socially acceptable”, says journalist Johann Hari: “by acting as though they are defending immigrants from the “ignorant” white working class”. By defining the white working class in terms of ethnicity rather than social class, liberal chav-haters ascribe their problems to cultural rather than economic factors.

It is the way they live that is the problem, not the unjust way society is structured. If white working-class people are oppressed, it is the result of their own fecklessness. While a liberal chav-hater will accept that massive discrimination against ethnic minority groups explains issues like unemployment and poverty and even violence, they do not believe white working-class people have such excuses.

The “real” working class is supposed to be white, badly educated, “aspirational for wealth”, bigoted and easily persuaded”, says prominent trade union leader Billy Hayes, who was born on a council estate in Liverpool.

Many of these caricatures appeared in the BBC’s White season, a supposedly sympathetic series of programmes dedicated to the white working class that aired in 2007. In reality, it simply boosted the image of white working class people as a race-obsessed, BNP-voting rump.

Their problems were not portrayed as economic - things like housing and jobs that affect working class people of all colours and did not get a look-in. They were simply portrayed as a minority culture under threat from mass immigration.

“The White season examines why some feel increasingly marginalized and explores possible reasons behind the rise in popularity of far-right politics in some sections of this community”, the BBC announced.

But the trailer for the series said it all: a white man’s face being scribbled over by dark-skinned hands with a black marker pen until he disappeared into the background. Accompanying the trailer was the question: “Is the white working class becoming invisible?” Here it was - all their problems being reduced to the issue of race.

Among those reportedly angered by this bias was the BBC reporter Sarah Mukherjee, a woman of Asian origin who grew up on a largely white council estate in Essex. The series left a “nasty taste in the mouth”, she said.

“Listening to the patronizing conversations in some newsrooms you’d think white, working-class Britain is one step away from anarchy, drinking themselves senseless and pausing only to draw benefits and beat up a few Asian and Black people”.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

As an example of how chav-bashing can be justified on anti-racist grounds, take a column written by journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "Tax-paying immigrants past and present keep indolent British scroungers on their couches drinking beer and watching television", she claimed.

"We, immigrants, are despised because we seize opportunities these slobs don't want." In another column entitled "Spare me the tears over the white working-class", she slams those who resist calling them racist:

"Working-class white men provoked race riots through the Fifties and Sixties, they kept 'darkies' out of pubs and clubs and work canteens. Who were the supporters of Oswald Mosley and Enoch Powell? The disempowered have used us to vent their natural-born hatred against the powerful".

Alibhai-Brown regards herself as a writer on the left - and yet she happily uses a perversion of anti-racism to slam white working-class people. This is chav-bashing as liberal bigotry in full swing. Columnist Janet Daley is among those who have perversely justified chav-bashing as a defence of ethnic minority people.

Recounting a run-in with what she described as an "English working-class sociopath" she launched into a tirade against working class violence. British working class people were, she said, a "self-loathing, self-destructive tranche of the population", she said, who lacked "civic culture".

In contrast, she celebrated the "religion, cultural dignity and a sense of family" brought by ethnic minorities. The only thing holding them back, she claimed, was the "mindless hatred of the indigenous working classes, who loathe them precisely for their cultural identity... I fear long after Britain has become a successful multi-racial society, it will be plagued by this diminishing detritus of the Industrial Revolution".

It is certainly a creative way of justifying hatred of working-class people. But then again, Janet Daley is not simply a snob: she is a class warrior. Another myth used to sustain chav-hate is the idea that the old, decent working class has died away, leaving a rump with no moral compass.

In one Daily Mail column, Amanda Platell, a former speechwriter for William Hague blamed "shabby values" of this rump for their situation. "When it comes to looking for the real cause why so many of the working class do worse at school, earn less and die younger, the blame must be placed elsewhere - on the countless number of feckless parents".

She even called the mothers of working-class children "slum mothers". As part of her argument that they were personally responsible for their situation, she argued: "The Working class of the past had enormous self-respect. Mothers wouldn't have been seen dead wearing pyjamas in their own kitchen, let alone in public".

As Rachael Johnson, editor of the *Lady* and sister of Boris Johnson, puts it: "What we're having is a media which is run by the middle class, for the middle class, of the middle class, aren't we?" She is spot on. The journalists who have stirred up chav-hate are from a narrow, privileged background.

Even papers with overwhelmingly working-class readerships join in the sport. Kevin Maguire told me of a *Sun* away day in which all the journalists dressed up as chavs. Chuckle at their venomous columns by all means, but be aware that you are revelling in the contempt of the privileged for the less fortunate.

In the current climate of chav-hate the class warriors of Fleet Street can finally get away with it, openly and flagrantly: caricaturing working class people as stupid, idle, racist, sexually promiscuous, dirty, and fond of vulgar clothes.

Nothing of worth is seen to emanate from working-class Britain. This chav-hate has become a fad among privileged youth. At universities like Oxford, middle-class students hold “chav bops” where they dress up as this working-class caricature.

Among those mocking the look was Prince William, one of the most privileged young men in the country. At a chav-themed fancy dress party to mark the end of his first term at Sandhurst, he dressed in a loose fitting top and “bling jewellery”, along with the must-have “angled baseball cap”.

But when the other cadets demanded he “put on a chavvy accent and stop speaking like a Royal”, he couldn’t do it. Welcome to twenty-first-century Britain, where royals dress up as their working-class subjects for a laugh.

To get a more detailed sense of what the “chav” phenomenon means to young people from privileged backgrounds, I had a chat with Oliver Harvey, an Old Etonian and president of the Oxford Conservative Association.

“Chav” is a word Harvey often hears bandied around beneath the dreaming spires of Oxford. “You’d think people would be educated here, but it’s still something people find funny”. Unlike other students, he dislikes the term because of its class meaning.

“I think it shows a patronizing attitude and is rather offensive. It’s a word used by more fortunate people towards less fortunate people... Unfortunately it’s now a popular term that has been transplanted into people’s everyday consciousness”.

A place like Oxford is fertile ground for chav-hate. Nearly half of its students were privately educated, and there are very, very few working-class people attending the university at all. It helps unlock that truth behind the phenomenon : here are privileged people with little contact with those lower down the scale.

It is easy to caricature people you do not understand. And indeed, many of these students owe their place at Oxford to the privileged circumstances that bought them a superior education. How comforting to pretend that they landed at Oxford because of their own talents, and that those at the bottom of society are there because they are thick, feckless or worse.

Such open mockery is a recent development, not least because until quite recently, many students felt embarrassed about privilege. “To be a middle-class student just twenty years ago carried such a social stigma that many graduates in their forties recall faking a proletarian accent for their entire university education”, says Guardian journalist Decca Aitkenhead.

“Nowadays, however, a popular student party theme is dressing up as “chavs” - working-class types with a taste for burberry, but not the budget, whose ideas above their station provide material for half the jokes on campus today”.

Scouring the Internet reveals the disturbing levels anti-chav hatred has reached in society at large. A YouTube video with around half a million hits proposes sending chavs to the moon. “But who’d care anyway if every chav goes to where there’s no KFC, no McDonald’s, no high street”, the singer croons cheerfully.

Before it was finally removed, a Facebook page with nearly three quarters of a million members was entitled “4000 chavs a year die from tesco cheap booze, Every little helps”. Type “kill chavs” into google and you get hundreds of thousands of results like “5 ways to kill a chav” and “the anti chav - kill Chav scum now”.

There’s even a game called “chav hunter” where you can shoot chavs. “Chav Hunter is about killing those pikey fucks who dress like 80s rappers. In a sniper fashion, aim for the head”, it recommends.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

But the chav phenomenon has sinister implications beyond revealing the growing hatred within the British class system. In early 2009, Ralph Surman, a teacher from Nottingham, launched into a tirade against what he called “a class of uber-chavs”.

“They are not doing anything productive and are costing taxpayers a fortune”. He knew exactly who to blame: “The offspring of the first big generation of single mothers were children in the 1980s. Now they are adults with their own children and the problems are leading to higher crime rates and low participation in the labour force”.

This dismissal of large swathes of young people may well have dire results. “The birth of ‘chavs’, as parodied by comedians such as Catherine Tate, can leave working-class people feeling patronized and laughed at”, writes journalist Hannah Frankel in a thoughtful piece on the education system’s approach to working-class people.

Catherine Tate’s comic character, a lazy teenage girl with an attitude problem and an annoying catchphrase - “Am I bovered?”, was just one example of how chav-bashing has become national entertainment.

Reality television shows, sketech shows, talk shows, even films have emerged dedicated to ridiculing working-class Britain. “Chavtainment” has reinforced the mainstream view of working-class individuals as bigoted, slothful, aggressive people who cannot look after themselves, let alone their children.

“On the one hand they’re served up as entertainment, you know, Wife Swap, whatever”, says Labour MP Jon Cruddas. “And simultaneously they’re something to be feared through this notion of a lawless ASBO nation which is at the gate”.

The bigots of privileged Britain have truly put an entire class in the stocks. The world of reality television must have been a bewildering experience for the late Jade Goody, a twenty-one-year-old dental nurse from Bermondsey.

Before she entered the Big Brother house, her life had been one of gut-wrenching hardship. When she was one, her mother threw out her junkie father for hiding guns underneath her cot. When she first saw the film *Trainspotting* at the cinema, she threw up when Ewan McGregor’s character injected himself with heroin.

“Those faces that he pulls are the same faces I’ve seen my dad pull, you see”, she recalled. She remembered the first time she rolled a joint for her mother - when she was just four years old. When her mother was disabled by a motorcycle accident, Jade was forced to look after her.

“Losing the use of her arm was infuriating for my mum, and as a result she often beat me”. Because she was born to a mixed-race father - “Which is why I’ve got such big lips” - she suffered racist abuse both at school and in her local community.

“My mum got into fights with a lot of women who lived in our block because she thought they were prejudiced”, she said, and her mum took her out of school for similar reasons. She worked in various shops before getting the job as a dental assistant.

But, with £3000 of unpaid rent, she faced eviction from her council flat and possible imprisonment for unpaid tax. That was until 2002, when she sent a promotional video of herself to the new Channel 4 reality television show, *Big Brother*.

There can be few more shameful episodes in the British media’s recent history than the hounding of Jade Goody. The youngest contestant, she reacted badly to the claustrophobic pressure of the television programme.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

She ate and drank to cope with the stress; she fooled around with one of the contestants; and she was bullied into getting naked on national television. The media despised her. Labelled a ‘pig’, she was mercilessly ridiculed for not knowing what asparagus was and for asking if “East Anglar” was abroad.

“Vote the pig out”, demanded the Sun, which also referred to her as an “oinker”. Others taunted her as a “vile fishwife” and “The Elephant Woman”. As the campaign became a hysterical witch-hunt, members of the public stood outside the studios with placards reading: “Burn the Pig!”

It is remarkable that anyone could have turned this avalanche of hatred around. But she did. Her disarming, almost boundless honesty, her disregard for the social graces of “respectable” society and her tortured background gradually endeared her to millions.

When she returned to the world of reality television, it was in the celebrity version of Big Brother. Then came the next wave of anti-Jade spite. Appearing alongside Jade Goody was Shilpa Shetty, an Indian Bollywood actress from a wealthy background.

Jade took an evident dislike to her, and there was open war between the two. It was a much misunderstood dispute. Shilpa suggested that Jade needed “elocution lessons”. When Jade infamously told the Indian actress to “go back to the slums” - a phrase wrongly taken to be racist in intent - she was attacking her for being what Jade described as “a posh, up-herself princess” who should see what real life was like.

“Ultimately we were fighting because we were from different classes”, she would later claim. “Who the fuck are you? You aren’t some Princess in Neverland”, she screamed at Shilpa when she tried to flush a cooked chicken down the toilet.

Other celebrities on the show, such as model Danielle Lloyd, suffered less media opprobrium despite calling Shetty “a dog” and telling her to “fuck off home”. But Goody’s undoubtedly stupid and racially tinged references to the actress as “Shilpa Poppadom” helped unleash a vitriolic media campaign.

“CLASS versus TRASH”, bellowed the Daily Express. The paper slammed “the porcine Jade Goody” and mourned the fact that “Miss Shetty, a huge star in India, has been forced to endure the kind of bullying usually heard around sink estates... We are being disgraced around the world by the likes of a semi-literate Jade and her unpleasant associates”.

The Express was outraged because it felt that a thick, ugly girl from a poor background was attacking a beautiful rich woman. Simon Heffer assailed Goody for indulging “in the only form of bigotry the law now permits to go unpunished: that of hating your social superiors”.

He questioned why Channel 4 had to use Big Brother to broadcast the “repulsive aspects of society” when we can see them so easily ourselves, if we wish, by wandering on to the nearest council estate for half an hour.

Even Stuart Jeffries in the liberal Guardian could not resist portraying the class as “between ugly, thick, white Britain and one imperturbably dignified Indian woman”. He even attacked Jade’s garbled English, suggesting she use her fortune for “remedial education”.

But then Stuart Jeffries was being educated at Oxford University while Jade Goody’s heroin-addicted father was hiding guns underneath her cot. On the BBC, Andrew Neil suggested she was just one of a “bunch of Vicky Pollards” and “thick bitches” cluttering television screens.

Richard Littlejohn described her as “the high Priestess of the Slagocracy”, and others offered her as “proof of Britain’s underclass”. In one BBC phone-in, she was described as “just another chav, the estates are full of them”.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The host laughed and suggested “hosing them down”. Meanwhile, Hamant Verma, the former editor of eastern Eye magazine, attributed “the open display of racism” to “Channel 4’s decision to give near-illiterate chavs such as Jade Goody so much airtime”.

One writer in the Nottingham Evening Post described Shetty’s tormentors as resembling “nothing more than a pack of slavering chav estate mongrels spoiling for a scrap”. It was not just Jade Goody who was under attack in these contributions: it was everybody who shared her background.

Those at the bottom of the pile in British society were being presented as little more than animals. “They smell, they’re dirty”, was how literary critic John Carey described attitudes towards the poor in interwar Britain. How much things have changed.

When Jade Goody was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2008, there was genuine and widespread sympathy for her. It was as if the media were trying to atone for their guilt. Well, parts of the media, anyway.

Just days before Jade Goody’s death, some journalists continued to take a pop at her as a proxy for those on the bottom rung of society. Now we have the “ultimate chav funeral”, wrote Daily Mail columnist Jan Moir.

When a figure such as celebrated journalist John Diamond recorded his own death from cancer through newspaper columns in The Times, he was applauded: but then again, he was a middle-class man writing for a middle-class newspaper.

What does the case of Jade Goody show us, other than the capacity of the British media for crassness and cruelty? Above all, it demonstrated that it is possible to say practically anything about people from Jade’s background. They are fair game.

Big Brother was not the only reality television show to lift the lid off class hatred. Wife Swap is a long-running Channel 4 programme where two wives with different backgrounds swap families for a couple of weeks.

As Polly Toynbee has remarked, it should really be called “Class Swap”. Invariably, one of the parties is portrayed as a “dysfunctional” working class family: feckless, unable to look after kids, bigoted, fag-smoking, beer-swilling and so on.

One former fan complained in an internet review that it was guilty of “soon deteriorating into fat uncouth working class people slagging each other off between cigarettes and swigging canned lager”. The journalist Toby Young felt sorry for Becky Fairhurst, a twenty-nine-year-old mother of three whose marriage fell apart following the programme.

“She’s an uneducated, white, working-class woman, and the programme’s makers left no stone unturned in their efforts to depict her as “council trash”, he wrote. He could not help but conclude that the programme “is designed to appeal to the snob in us. Here was a prime example of that urban species known as “the Chavs””.

The Jeremy Kyle chatshow has a similar purpose. Week after week, dysfunctional individuals from overwhelmingly working-class backgrounds are served up as daytime entertainment fodder. Vulnerable people with complex personal troubles are thrown in front of baying audiences: a “human form of bear-baiting”, as one British judge was to describe it.

Intensely emotional problems like suspicions of infidelity and “who’s the real father?” scenarios are exploited for the viewer’s vicarious thrills. Little wonder it was lambasted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation “as a rather brutal form of entertainment that is based on derision of the lower-working-class population”.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

By portraying them as “undeserving” it undermined support for anti-poverty initiatives, the foundation claimed. And then of course there are the comedy chav caricatures. None has caught the popular imagination like Little Britain’s Vicky Pollard, created by comedians Matt Lucas and David Williams.

Pollard is presented as a grotesque working-class teenage singlemother who is sexually promiscuous, unable to string a sentence together, and has a very bad attitude problem. In one sketch she swaps her baby for a Westlife cd.

In another, when reminded to take her baby home she replies: “oh no it’s ok, you can keep it, I’ve got loads more at home anyway”. Johann Hari points out that we are laughing at two ex-private-school boys dressing up as working-class single mothers. Matt Lucas’s old school, Haberdashers’ Aske’s, charges around £10,000 a year.

“But of course, when Jim Davidson dressed up as a black man to say all black people were thick, we quite rightly said how stupid and outrageous it was”, says Hari. All of this might be explained away as a bit of harmless fun.

But consider the fact that a YouGov poll at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 2006 revealed that most people working in television thought Vicky Pollard was an accurate representation of Britain’s white working-class.

Matt Lucas himself has attacked critics “who resent the fact that he and David are white, middle-class men, implying that they shouldn’t be allowed to create characters that are working-class single mums because they’re not from that world.”

His defence? “But if the observation rings true and is funny, then why would it matter who is making the observation and what their background is?” It’s ok for a privileged individual like him to mock working-class people - because working-class single mums really are like this.

No wonder Vicky Pollard has caught the imagination of right-wing class warriors. According to Richard Littlejohn “Matt Lucas and David Williams’ Burberried chavs captured perfectly the gruesome reality of so much of our modern landscape”.

James Delingpole - who farcically argued that he was a member of the most discriminated-against group in society, “the white, middle-aged, public school and oxbridge educated middle-class male” - was satisfied that the “vicky pollards and the waynes and waynettas of our world have got it coming to them. If they weren’t quite so repellent, we wouldn’t need to make jokes about them, would we?”

Indeed little Britain was funny because it was true. It is not just the right-wing pundits who think working-class Britain is populated by Vicky Pollards: even the Beeb is guilty. An online news feature entitled “What is working class?” was illustrated with a photo of Vicky Pollard and some of her friends.

Below was the caption: “Does Vicky Pollard sum up the working class?” The article did not answer the question, leaving the possibility open for the reader. The problem is not always that television programmes deliberately set out to smear working-class people.

Take Shameless, the long-running Channel 4 series focusing on the chaotic Gallagher family, which lives in the fictional Chatsworth Estate in Manchester. The dad is a drunken layabout who has fathered eight kids with two women.

Their lives revolve around sex, benefits, crime and drugs. And yet the creator of Shameless is Paul Abbott. He is not some bigot from a pampered background who thinks it is funny to point and laugh at the “oiks”. In fact, he bases the series on his own experiences as a working-class boy growing up in Burnley.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

In the programme, one of the children ends up going to university; another is in the gifted and talented stream at school. The problem with the series is that it fails to address how the characters ended up in their situation, or what impact the destruction of industry has had on working-class communities in Manchester.

Class becomes a lifestyle choice, and poverty becomes a bit of a joke - not something that imprisons people and shatters their life chances. The series gives a middle-class viewer who had had no real contact with people from different backgrounds little opportunity to understand the broader context behind the issues raised.

Paul Abbott's original plan for the series was rather different to how it actually panned out. According to George Faber, the co-founder of Company Pictures which produces *Shameless*, Abbott's original idea "was substantially autobiographical, and he wanted to write it as a single film for television".

The danger with *Shameless* is that the viewer is encouraged to laugh at, rather than understand, the lives of the characters. "Do the real working-class people of this country watch *Shameless*?" asks Kate Wreford on Channel 4's *Shameless* website. "I am sort of middle class but I wonder what the real working class think of it".

On a student forum, one contributor asks if the series is "an accurate representation of British working-class people today?" One of the replies was straight to the point. "Yes, many working-class people are scum. Many drink too much smoke, steal and lack ambition".

Little wonder that when Robin Nelson, a professor of theatre and television drama interviewed working-class viewers of the series, they "declared their discomfort in watching *Shameless* because they feel they are being invited to laugh at their own class".

But modern entertainment does not encourage us only to laugh at the chavs. It also wants us to be afraid of them. There is no more extreme example of this than the film *Eden Lake*. The plot is fairly simple. An affluent, photogenic couple from London flee to the countryside for a romantic weekend holiday break.

When they see that the idyllic *Eden Lake* is being transformed into gated communities, they make some right-on comments, wondering whom they are trying to keep out. They find out the hard way why the middle classes have every reason to fear the lower orders.

After the couple stand up to some local, semi-feral, aggressive dog-owning kids, they are mercilessly hunted down and tortured. Under the direction of a psychopathic ringleader, the kids use their mobile phones to film the boyfriend being slashed with knives before his body is burned.

But perhaps most disturbing is the role of the parents - waitresses, painters, and decorators and so on - who routinely swear and slap their kids about. In a shocking finale, it is they who apparently torture the girlfriend to death after she kills a couple of "chavs" in revenge.

If you have a society as segregated along class lines as our own, and you show films portraying the working class as a bunch of psychopaths, do not be surprised if middle-class people start believing it. The soap operas have travelled a long way from their origins.

Rather than realistically showing how most people live their lives - with drama thrown in, of course - they have become sensationalized and caricatural. Already in the early 1990s, former *EastEnders* scriptwriter David Yallop savaged the show, arguing that it was "created by middle-class people with a middle class view of the working class which is patronizing, idealistic and untruthful. It is a dreary show run by dreary people".

What relationship is there between *EastEnders* or *Coronation Street* for that matter, and the lives of millions of people working in shops, call centres and offices? Both soaps have a disproportionate number
Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

of small business people, such as pub landlords like EastEnders' Pat Butcher or shopkeepers in Coronation Street.

The soaps compete with each other over frankly ludicrous plots: take the effective resurrection of Dirty Den in EastEnders, for example. The working-class might not get a proper look-in on telly, but the wealthy are spoilt for choice.

Switch on Britain's Dream Homes or I Own Britain's Best Home and watch them saunter around rural Britain ogling country mansions; watch grand properties being restored in Country House Rescue; zap over to A Place in the Sun and let Amanda Lamb give you a guided tour of wealthy Britons fleeing to buy up in Greece or Crete.

Indeed, property programmes like Relocation, Relocation and Property Ladder are two-a-penny. Above all, posh is mostly certainly in. Watch Old Etonian chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall rustle up an organic treat; be dazzled by the public-school charm of other television chefs like Valentie Warner and Thomasina Miers; then enjoy the aristocratic Kirstie Allsopp encouraging you to gaze starry-eyed at unaffordable homes.

Too much of our television consists of promotional spiel for the lifestyles, desires and exclusive opportunities of the rich and powerful. It is all part of the redefining of aspiration, persuading us that life is about getting up that ladder, buying a bigger house and car and living it up in some private tropical paradise.

It is not just that ordinary people watching these shows are made to feel inadequate. Those who do not strive for such dreams are thought of as "non-aspirational" or, more bluntly, failures. The hopes and fears of working-class people, their surroundings, their communities, how they earn a living - this does not exist as far as television is concerned.

Where working-class people do appear, it is generally as caricatures invented by wealthy producers and comedians that are then, in turn, appropriated by lower-middle-class journalists for political purposes. Chav-hate has even trickled into the popular music scene.

From the Beatles onwards, working-class bands once dominated rock, and indie music in particular: the Stone Roses, the Smiths, Happy Mondays and the Verve, to take a few popular examples. But it is difficult to name any prominent working-class bands since the heyday of Oasis in the mid 1990s: it is middle-class bands like Coldplay or Keane that now rule the roost in music.

There's an abundance of middle-class impersonations of working-class caricatures, such as the "mockney" style of artists like Damon Albarn and Lily Allen.

The Kaiser Chiefs made a name for themselves with the sort of repetitive indie anthem that lends itself to drunken chanting in a club. Listen carefully to their lyrics, however, and you discover pure class bile: Take "I predict a Riot": "I tried to get you in my taxi/ A man in a tracksuit attacked me/He said that he saw it before me/ Wants to get things a bit gorey/Girls scramble around with no clothes on / To borrow a pound for a condom / It it wasn't for chip fat, they'd be frozen/ They're not very sensible".

The last lines reproduce the caricature of the undignified "slapper" chav girl. Working class people have become objects of ridicule, disapproval and hatred. Welcome to the world of British entertainment in the early twenty-first century.

The contempt for working-class people that built up under Thatcherism had reached its terrible zenith in the Hillsborough Disaster. Today, football continues to offer clues to the dramatic change in attitudes over the past three decades.

By looking at what has happened to the traditional sporting passion of working-class Britain, we can get a good idea of the cultural aspect of chav-hate. The “beautiful game” has been transformed beyond recognition.

Major clubs used to remain deeply rooted in their working-class communities. Footballers were generally boys plucked from the club’s local area. Unlike the spoiled plutocrats that some of the premier league players have become, for much of the twentieth century footballers were often worse off than the crowds watching them from the terraces on Saturday.

Back in the early 1950s, there was a maximum salary for players of just £14 a week during the season - and only one in five players were lucky enough to earn that. Players lived in tied cottages - houses owned by clubs from which they could be evicted at any moment.

Little wonder one footballer, speaking at the 1955 Trades Union Congress, complained that “the conditions of the professional footballer’s employment are akin to slavery”. Football has gone from one extreme to another. The cold winds of free-market economics had largely been kept out of the football world during the 1980s.

In the 1990s, they hit with a vengeance. In 1992, the twenty-two clubs of the old First Division broke away to establish the Premier League, freeing them from the requirement to share revenues with clubs in the rest of the League.

Part of the new commercial ethos was to keep many working-class people out of the stadium. In its Blueprint for the Future of Football, the Football Association argued that the game must attract “more affluent middle-class consumers”.

When the old terraces were abolished after the Hillsborough disaster, the cheaper standing tickets disappeared. Between 1990 and 2008, the price of the average football ticket rose by 600 percent, well over seven times the rate of everything else.

This was completely unaffordable for many working-class people. But some senior football figures were not only aware of this - they even celebrated it. As former England manager Terry Venables put it:

“Without wishing to sound snobbish or to be disloyal to my own working-class background, the increase in admission prices is likely to exclude the sort of people who were giving English football a bad name. I am talking about the young men, mostly working-class, who terrorized football grounds, railway trains, cross-channel ferries and towns and cities throughout England and Europe”.

The demonization of working-class people was being used to justify hiking up ticket prices and, in the process, keep them out. At the same time, football became big money - and big business. In the early 1990s, Rupert Murdoch’s BskyB signed an agreement to pay £305 million for exclusive rights to the new FA Carling Premiership.

In 1997 they signed another four-year deal, with a £670 million price tag. Not only are huge numbers of working class people financially barred from stadiums: many cannot even watch their team play unless they splash out on a Sky box.

Meanwhile, the huge amount of money sloshing about in the game has severed football teams from their local communities. Huge transfer fees mean that players from hundreds or thousands of miles away dominate the major teams.

Clubs have become the playthings of American asset-strippers and Russian oligarchs. And with players being paid more than £160,000 a week, they are completely divorced from their working class roots. Labour MP Stephen Pound mourns the loss of this working-class icon.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

“If you look at the working-class heroes - people like Frank Lampard and David Beckham - what’s the first thing they do? They move out of the working-class areas into Cheshire or Surrey. The role models don’t have the confidence to stick with it.”

It is the ultimate insult. A game that was at the centre of working-class culture for so long has been transformed into a middle-class consumer good controlled by billionaire carpetbaggers. Caricaturing all working-class fans as aggressive hooligans intent on mindless violence has provided the excuse to keep them out.

Football was identified as a potentially lucrative piece of working class culture, so it was taken away and repackaged. But in today’s Britain, nothing about working-class life is considered worthy or admirable. “Working class” is no longer a term that can be qualified with the word “respectable”, because it is now almost wholly a subtly loaded insult”, wrote the journalist Deborah Orr.

None of the chav-bashing we’ve explored can be understood in isolation. It is part and parcel of an offensive against everything associated with the working class, started by Thatcherism and cemented by New Labour.

“I think culture reflects politics”, says Ken Loach. “there wa a major shift during the Thatcher years. It was the era of “loads of money”, it was the era of “looking after number one”, all the jewellery, the city Boys with their red braces - it was a worship of capital”.

This vanquishing of working-class Britain had inevitable cultural consequences. “So after that, t he trade unions were diminished, working-class culture was diminished, celebration of working class culture was diminished - but it stemmed from that political moment”, Loach says.

Everything is to be judged by middle-class standards because, after all, that is what we are expected to aspire to. The working-class is therefore portrayed as a useless vestige made up of “non-aspirational” layabouts, slobs, racists, boozers, thugs - you name it.

It is both tragic and absurd that, as our society has become less equal and as in recent years the poor have actually got poorer, resentment against those at the bottom has postively increased. Chav-hate is a way of justifying an unequal society.

What if you have wealth and success because it has been handed to you on a plate? What if people are poorer than you because the odds are stacked against them? To accept this would trigger a crisis of self-confidence among the well-off few.

And if you were to accept it, then surely you would have to accept that the government’s duty is to do something about it - namely, by curtailing your own privileges. But, if you convince yourself that the less fortunate are smelly, thick, racist and rude by nature, then it is only right they should remain at the bottom.

Chav-hate justifies the preservation of the pecking order, based on the fiction that it is actually a fair reflection of people’s worth. To what extent is chav-hate just a new wave of old-style snobbery, rebranded for the twenty-first century?

Snobbery certainly comes into it. Just look at the mocking of the tracksuit-and-bling style popular among some working-class people, especially teenagers. It is true that people’s backgrounds often define how they dress.

Walk into the bar of Oxford University’s debating society, the Oxford Union, and you will see a crowd of public-school types wearing bow ties, tweed jackets and pink cords. There is even the chance that you will spot the odd one with a pipe in hand.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

The reality is that chav-hate is a lot more than snobbery. It is class war. It is an expression of the belief that everyone should become middle class and embrace middle-class values and lifestyles, leaving those who don't to be ridiculed and hated.

It is about refusing to acknowledge anything of worth in working-class Britain, and systematically ripping it to shreds in newspapers, on television, on facebook, and in general conversation. That is what the demonization of the working class means.

The caricatures thrown up by chav-hate have other consequences. Coupled with the ludicrous mainstream political view that Britain is now a classless society, the "chav" phenomenon obscures what it means to be working class today.

The myth that British society is divided between an affluent middle-class majority and a declining working class rump has airbrushed the reality of class in Britain today. An overwhelmingly middle-class political and media establishment has been more than happy to foster this image.

It's time to look beyond the Vicky Pollards, the chav bops and reality television shows, and ask: "What is the working class in twenty-first century Britain?"

"We're All Middle Class Now"

"To say that class doesn't matter in Britain is like saying that wine doesn't matter in France; or whether you're a man or a woman doesn't matter in Saudi Arabia" - Nick Cohen.

Is the working class no more? Tony Blair certainly thinks so. His one-time senior advisor Matthew Taylor recalls the former prime minister proudly announcing that "we're all middle class" at a think-tank event when he was still the Labour leader.

Some of our lower middle class journalists are inclined to agree: "We're all middle class, now, darling", echoed the Daily Telegraph. Or as the Times put it: "We're all middle class now as social barriers fall away".

The Daily Mail goes into greater detail: "You might say that there are now three main classes in Britain: a scarily alienated underclass; the new and confident middle class, set free by the Thatcher revolution... and a tiny, and increasingly powerless, upper class".

The chav caricature has obscured the reality of the modern working class. We are fed the impression of a more or less comfortable "Middle England" on the one hand, while on the other the old working class has degenerated into a hopeless chav rump.

It certainly used to be easier to answer the question: "Who is the working class?" Partly because of the ruinous economic policies of successive governments, the mines have closed, the docks are deserted, and most of the car factories are empty husks.

As these old pillars of working-class Britain crumble, it has become easier for politicians and pundits to claim that we really are all middle class now. The long, lingering demise of the industrial working class began but did not end with Thatcher.

When New Labour swept to power in 1997, manufacturing made up more than a fifth of the economy. A paltry 12 percent was all that was left by the time Tony Blair left office in 2007. Back in 1979, there were nearly 7 million people working in factories, but today's number is just over 2.5 million.

The policies of governments besotted with City slickers must take much of the blame. "Labour bought into the whole myth of the boom in the financial sector and the City", says Elliott. Like previous Tory

governments, New Labour presided over an overvalued exchange rate, rendering out manufacturing goods deeply uncompetitive abroad.

It paid lip service to its old industrial base, but did absolutely nothing to help it, and in fact actually made things a lot worse for the manufacturing sector. With all the talk about the “information economy” and a country where more people work in pop music than down the mines, it is easy to overstate the point.

Nearly four out of every ten men are still manual workers. But there is no denying an obvious trend. Industrial occupations are vanishing with every passing year. Already embattled sectors suffered yet more crippling blows at the hands of the Great Recession in 2008.

The crisis may have been caused by the greed of bankers, but manufacturing paid the price. It lost well over twice the proportion of jobs as finance and business services in the first year of the crisis. The City’s share of the economy has actually grown since 2005, leaving us more dependent on the part of the economy that caused the crash in the first place.

as former City economist Graham Turner puts it, it is “a staggering outcome of this credit crunch”. With industrial jobs steadily drying up, it might seem bizarre that the British public stubbornly continues to self-identify as working class.

Matthew Taylor recalls reactions to Blair’s “we’re all middle class” speech: “It was quickly pointed out that more people in Britain call themselves working class now than did in 1950”. Opinion polls show that over half the population consistently describes itself as working class.

But one poll in 1949 recorded it as just 43 percent. That was at a time when there were a million miners, most people worked in manual jobs, and rationing was still in full swing. In the era of deindustrialization, how can most people honestly regard themselves as working class?

You could be forgiven for thinking that there is an identity crisis going on. Multi-millionaire businessman Mohamed Al Fayed once described himself as working class. I have heard of stockbrokers with telephone number salaries who ask with faux puzzlement: “I work, don’t I? So why aren’t I working class?”

If you look at the polling numbers, it is true that some people in the top socio-economic category describe themselves as working class. Equally, some in the bottom category think they are middle class. The vilification of all things working class seems to have had a real impact on people’s attitudes.

In the run-up to the 2010 general election, the Guardian journalist Simon Hattenstone asked a former bus driver, who had retired in 1981 on £50 a week, which class he belonged to. “Middle class”, he said after a bit of thought. Why? He associated working class with being broke.

With so much confusion about class, what does it mean to be working class? When I put this question to New Labour ex-Cabinet minister James Purnell, he thought a big part of the answer was “cultural identity” and “a sense of history and a sense of place”.

In reality this sense of rootedness has been breaking down for a long time, partly because of the collapse of industry. Entire working-class communities used to be based around a particular factory, steelworks, or mine.

Most of the men would work at the same place. Their fathers and their grandfathers may well have worked there and done similar jobs. When industries disappeared, the communities they sustained became fragmented.

It is often tempting to think of class in terms of income. So, you could stick a “working class” label on someone earning £14,000 a year, and a “middle class” label on someone earning 60,000. Yet there are

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

small businessmen who might only make a few grand. A well-paid skilled worker could be getting twice as much as a shopkeeper brings home.

Another challenge to the existence of the working class came from the almost religious fervour with which Tory and New Labour governments have promoted home ownership. Thatcherism certainly saw it as a means of breaking down class identity.

Clearly home ownership has promoted individualism, or even a sense of “everyone for themselves”, including among some working-class homeowners. But the fact that millions of people have had to borrow beyond their means, sooner than pay an affordable rent below extortionate market rates.

Working class homeowners are now scared out of their wits about whether they’ll be able to keep mortgage payments up. The number of people who go to bed every night and have nightmares about getting repossessed is a major issue.

The living standards of some working-class people are lower than they would be if they were paying cheap council rents rather than often very expensive mortgages. Over half the people living in poverty are homeowners.

There are actually more homeowners in the bottom 10 percent than there are in each of the two deciles above it. As we know, encouraging so many people to take on unaffordable levels of debt had a detonator role in the credit crunch.

In any case, as more and more people have become priced out of home ownership, it has gone into reverse: peaking at 71 percent in 2002-03 and falling back to 68 percent six years later. If it is not community, income or living arrangements that defines the working class, what is it?

Neil Kinnock may be the Labour leader who laid the foundations of the party’s dramatic swing to the right, but he still feels most comfortable with how Karl Marx put it: “I’d use the broad definition: people who have no means of sustenance other than the sale of labour, are working class”.

This is very clear: the working class as a catch-all term for people who labour for others. When I asked Birmingham supermarket worker Mary Lynch which class she belonged to, she had no doubt that it was the working class.

“I just feel we’re working just to pay our way all the time.” These must be the starting points of understanding what “working class” means: the class of people who work for others in order to get by in life.

But it’s only a start. Is a Cambridge don really in the same category as a supermarket checkout worker? The important qualification to add is not only those who sell their labour, but those who lack autonomy, or control over this labour.

Both a university professor and a retail employee must work to survive; but a professor has huge power over their everyday activity, while a shop assistant does not. A professor does have room for creativity and the ability to set their own tasks. A shop worker has a set of very narrowly defined tasks with little variation, and must carry them out according to specific instructions.

A look at the statistics uncovers the working class majority. Over eight million of us still have manual jobs, and another eight million are clerks, secretaries, sales assistants and in other personal and customer service jobs.

That adds up to well over half the workforce, and still excludes teachers, health workers such as nurses, and train drivers, who are assigned to categories such as “professional occupations”. Although income is not the deciding factor, there is a link between the sort of job you do and the money you get.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

A median income household receives just £21,000. This is the exact midpoint, meaning that half the population earns less. Here is the real Middle Britain, not the mythical “Middle England” invented by media pundits and politicians that really refers to the affluent voter.

Most people work for others and lack control over their labour. But many of them are no longer toiling away in factories and mines. The last three decades have seen the dramatic rise of a new service sector working class.

Their jobs are cleaner and less physically arduous, but often of a lower status, insecure, and poorly paid. “In terms of the world we live in now”, says Mark Serwotka, leader of the Public and Commercial Services Union “and I look at our members, I think that the jobs that working-class people do are changing and quite clearly now there aren’t miners, there aren’t big steelworks in the way there was when I was growing up. But in the new industries, I think we actually see exploitation of working people on a par if not greater than we’ve ever seen before”.

Mary Cunningham, a fifty-five-year-old supermarket worker in Newcastle, is a child of the old industrial working class. She left school in the middle of O-levels to look after her dying mother, although school wasn’t for her in any case.

Her first job was working on the old press-down tills at the now defunct Woolworths, and she remembers being there when decimalization came to replace the old pounds, shillings and pence in 1971. Mary is an important part of the puzzle of modern working-class Britain.

Supermarket workers like her, derided as “chavs” by websites like ChavTowns, are one of the chief components of the new working class. Retail is the second biggest employer in the country, with nearly three million people working in British shops: that’s more than one in ten workers, and a threefold increase since 1980.

Shop work used to be seen as quite a genteel profession, staffed mostly by lower-middle-class women. It has changed dramatically. In the old industrial heartlands, the supermarket has been hooving up people who once worked in factories. Mary says:

“men from the factories are coming now into retail and sitting on the checkouts, because there’s nothing much else really. We have people in our stores who are qualified to do better jobs than they’re doing, but they’re just glad they’re in employment”.

Like Mary, the majority of shop workers are women, in fact, nearly two-thirds of them. “There’s a lot of housewives, obviously. There’s also young mothers who are tying it in with picking their children up from school, a lot of them single mothers”.

Retail has changed as it has expanded. “I think in the latter few years it has got worse, got harder”, Mary says. “When I started, you could have a little bit of time with the customer, and get to know your customer, you had your regulars that came to you because you had that little bit of rapport with them.”

“Now it’s get on with the job, you have to have targets. You’re supposed to get through so many customers an hour”. Retail is becoming increasingly automated, to resemble old-style mass production in a factory.

Supermarket workers like Mary are often at the mercy of autocratic and abusive managers. Many had some of her colleagues were forced to lodge a complaint against one: “If you work with her, she’ll bang her fist on the counter and say “why isn’t that done?” in front of customers, and she has grown women that dare not approach her. She costs the company money because of all the retraining, everyone wants to be off that department, or they leave”.

They bullying doesn't just come from managers. According to the shop workers' union U S D A W, up to half a million shop workers endure verbal abuse from customers every day. Little wonder that on survey showed that nearly a fifth of retail staff were prepared to jump ship for the same or slightly less money.

According to U S D A W, the average staff turnover for shop workers is 62 percent a year. And then there's the pay. If you work on a checkout in Mary's supermarket, you can expect to make just £6.12 an hour. Lunch is unpaid.

This is pretty standard: indeed, fully half of retail workers earn less than £7 an hour. Shop workers face arbitrary attacks on these already poor wages and conditions. Less than two years into the economic crisis that began in 2007, one in four retail and sales workers has had their pay slashed.

Nearly a third had their hours cut, and over a fifth lost benefits. If you think shop workers have had it bad, consider now the call centre worker. There are now nearly a million people working in call centres, and the number is going up every year.

To put that in perspective, there were a million men down the pits at the peak of mining in the 1940s. If the miner was one of the iconic jobs of post-war Britain, then today, surely, the call centre worker is as good a symbol of working class as any.

"Call centres are a very regimented environment", says John McNally, a trade unionist leading efforts by the P C S to unionize call centre workers. "It's rows of desks with people sitting with headphones. There's loads of people in the room, but they're separate units".

"They're encouraged not to talk, share experiences, and so on. The minute you get in the door, your movements are regulated by the computer". Here is the lack of worker's autonomy in the workplace taken to extremes.

In some call centres he has dealt with, a worker in Bristol or Glasgow who wants to leave fifteen minutes early has to go through head office in Sheffield to be cleared. "We've likened conditions to those you'd have seen in mills or factories at the end of the nineteenth century".

Think that's an exaggeration? Then consider the fact that, in some call centres, workers have to put their hands up to go to the toilet. Computers dictate the time and duration of breaks, with no flexibility whatsoever. Employees are under constant monitoring and surveillance, driving up stress levels.

Many call centre workers have told McNally that the whole experience is "very dehumanizing". People talk about being treated like robots. Everything is regulated by machines. The working lives of many operators consist of reading through the same script over and over again.

According to the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, increasing numbers of call centre workers are being referred to speech therapists because they are losing their voices. The cause? Working long hours with little opportunity to even have a drink of water.

That's one reason why the sickness rate in call centres is nearly twice the national average. The other is deep alienation from the work. In one call centre McNally dealt with in Northern England, sickness rates had reached nearly 30 percent.

"That's a sign of low morale", he says - as is the fact that annual staff turnover is around a quarter of the workforce. And, like so much of the new working class, the salaries of call centre workers are poor. A trainee can expect £12,500, while the higher-grade operators are on an average of just £16,000.

Twenty-eight-year-old Carl Leishman has been a call centre worker in County Durham for eight years. For seven of those, he worked in a bank's call centre; today he is with a phone company. He works bruising twelve-hour shifts, three days on and three days off.

"I would probably have started off life as middle class", he says of his upbringing. "But the way I am now - and obviously the wage I get paid - I would say that I'm down to working class."

At his previous job, stiff targets had to be met. Four percent of his working hours were set aside for needs like going to the toilet or getting a drink. "You'd get ratings at the end of each month, and if you'd gone above those percentages, then your rating would drop, affecting in the end what bonuses and pay rises you were getting".

Carl didn't need to go to the toilet too often - "whereas other people, like pregnant women, could really struggle to stick to that". He describes the training at his current job as "woefully inadequate", particularly when it comes to dealing with abusive customers, who, he says, are a daily occurrence.

His employers have no hang-up policy, even when a customer is swearing and being aggressive. "You'll see quite often on the floor people in tears at the way people have spoken to them", he says. It is a job that can have consequences for your health, too.

"Your throat gets incredibly dry. There are people I've known whose throats have gone from doing it. A lady I used to work with had to actually leave because her voice was just completely shot". At the core of his experience at work is the lack of control over what he does.

"We're set in rows, which I hate, to be honest. It can sometimes feel very much like a chicken factory, as though you don't have too much control over what you're doing. You don't need to think for yourself too much".

Little wonder that Carl says that "one of the most fulfilling things is when you do get a bit of time off the phone. But trying to balance that with obviously getting the customer serviced is nigh on impossible sometimes."

His current employer does offer things like a television in the break room, and free teas and coffees: but these do not offset the basic alienation Carl feels from his job. Carl's salary is just £14,400 a year. When the conservative-led government announced that it would hike up VAT, it was the last straw and he decided he had no choice but to move back in with his parent.

Does he think he is paid too little? "For the grief you get, definitely! It's one of those jobs that you've got to put up with the abuse of customers and long hours as well, which can be hard work. But I think, definitely, the wages aren't representative of the amount of work you put in".

Both Mary and Carl work with a number of part-time and temporary staff. Their numbers have soared over the last thirty years as successive governments have striven to create a "flexible" workforce. In part, they have made it far easier and cheaper for bosses to hire and fire workers at will.

But we have also been witnessing the slow death of the secure, fulltime job. There are up to 1.5 million temporary workers in Britain. A "temp" can be hired and fired at an hour's notice, be paid less for doing the same job, and lacks rights such as paid holidays and redundancy pay.

Agency work is thriving in the service sector, but an incident at a car plant near Oxford in early 2009 illustrates where the rise of the temp has brought us. Eight hundred and fifty temps - many of them who had worked in the factory for years - were sacked by BMW with just one hour's notice.

Sacking agency workers was, of course, the cheapest option because the company did not have to give them any redundancy pay. The workers, with no means of defending themselves from this calamity,

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

restorted to pelting managers with apples and oranges. “It’s a disgrace, I feel as though I’ve been used”, said one.

It is not just agency and temporary workers who suffer because of job insecurity and outrageous terms and conditions. Fellow workers are forced to compete with people who can be hired far more cheaply. Everyone’s wages are pushed down as a result. This is the “race to the bottom” of pay and conditions.

It might sound like a throwback to the Victorian era, but this could be the future for millions of workers as businesses exploit economic crisis for their own ends. In a document entitled “The Shape of Business - the Next Ten Years”, the Confederation of British Industry, which represents major employers, claimed that the crash was the catalyst for a new era in business.

The document called for the creation of an even more “flexible” workforce, which would mean firms employing a smaller core of permanent workers and a larger, fluctuating “flexiforce”. This means even more temporary workers deprived of basic rights and conditions, who can be hired and fired at a moment’s notice.

Indeed, one survey in 2010 found that nearly nine out of ten businesses would be at the very least sustaining the use of temporary workers. The other striking feature of the new working class is the rise of the part time worker.

Over a quarter of Britain’s workforce now works part-time, one of the highest levels in Europe. The number has soared during the recession as sacked full-time workers are forced to take up part-time work to make ends meet, helping to keep unemployment figures down.

For example, figures released in December 2009 showed that the number of people in work had started to rise despite the recession. But, of the 50,000 new jobs, the majority were part time - “confirming the gradual trend towards ‘casualized’ working”, as the Independent reported.

“Full-time work is still falling, driven by continued job losses in manufacturing and construction”, according to Ian Brinkley, associate director at The Work Foundation. When I discussed the rise of the hire-and-fire service sector with leading Tory MP David Davis, he was soothingly skeptical.

“The idea that the only good jobs are ones where you have to lift a half-ton weight every day is unmitigated crap”. But the evidence contradicts him: every passing day sees the further consolidation of a hire-and-fire workforce in Britain.

Many of the new jobs are not only more insecure than the ones they’ve replaced; the pay is often worse. According to 2008 figures, half of all service sector workers were on less than £20,000 a year. But the median in manufacturing was £24,343, or nearly a quarter more.

An example illustrates how well-paid manufacturing jobs are being replaced by a stingier service sector. When Longbridge carmaker M G Rover went bust in 2005, 6,300 jobs went to the wall. The median annual income of the workers in their new jobs was just £18,728, a fifth less than the £24,000 they were earning back at Rover.

For the third or so lucky enough to stay in the manufacturing sector, wages had stayed more or less the same, But for the 60 percent now in the service sector, earnings were considerably less. It is the same story in other areas hit by the destruction of industry - old mining regions, for example.

“Obviously the new jobs are cleaner than working down a mine”, says former Nottinghamshire miner Adrian Gilfoyle. “But the money is worse. We used to be on bonuses and all sorts for cutting coal, and you used to earn really good money. Now you’re luck if you bring in £200 a week. And with the cost of living nowadays, it’s not a lot of money”.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The disappearance of skilled jobs is creating a “missing middle”. We’ve seen a polarization of the labour market, as relatively well-paid manufacturing jobs are replaced by less well-paid jobs in the service sector. Others call it the “hourglass” economy: highly paid jobs at one end, and welling numbers of low-paid, unskilled jobs at the other. The middle-level occupations, on the other hand, are shrinking.

Hairdressing is an example of a booming low-paid service sector job. It’s one of the worst-paid jobs in Britain: the median salary for a female stylist is less than £12,000. There are over 170,000 hairdressers in Britain today.

Other rapidly expanding low-paid jobs include data input, security guards, receptionists, care assistants and cleaners. These low-paid jobs are the only ones on offer for growing numbers of workers who, in a different time, would have taken up a middle level job with relatively good pay.

It wasn’t just the manufacturing sector was wiped out. I mean, in London we used to have a million and a quarter manufacturing jobs, now it’s just over 200,000 - that’s mainly high-end printing”, says former London mayor Ken Livingstone.

“But there’s a whole layer of really well-paid jobs in the utilities, which, as they were privatized, were all wiped out. And so, for a working-class person, the jobs have been dramatically narrowed”.

One of the things that distinguished the old industrial working class was a strong trade union movement to fight its corner. Back in the late 1970s, over half of all workers were union members. Today unions remain the biggest civil society organizations in the country, but their membership has steeply declined from thirteen million in 1979 to just over seven million today.

The decline becomes even starker when you consider that, while over half of public sector workers are union members, the same is true of only 15 percent in the private sector. The new service sector jobs are more or less a union-free zone.

Thatcher’s pummelling of the unions certainly goes a long way toward explaining this weakness. As former Labour Cabinet minister Tony Benn points out, the laws “are more restrictive on trade union rights than they were a hundred years ago”.

Their presence on the statute books puts Britain in violation of its obligations as a signatory to International Labour Organization conventions. Not only do they make it difficult for unions to organize in the workplace, the laws also prevent them from fighting on behalf of their members.

Unite was taken to court by British Airways in 2010, over a long-running dispute with cabin crew. Despite eight out of ten workers voting for strike action on the back of a 78 percent turnout, the judge banned the strike. Why? Because the union had failed to give notice by text message that eleven out of 9,282 votes had been spoilt.

Industrial relations specialist Professor Gregor Gall is right to point out that unions were stronger in manufacturing because of “the time in which unionization occurred. This was an era of greater union and worker rights, far more progressive public policy and law and less powerful employers”.

The dog-eat-dog individualism unleashed by Thatcherism also undermined the collective spirit at the heart of trade unionism. And it is more difficult for unions to put down roots in the transient service sector. Factories with hundreds of workers who were there for the long haul were simply easier to organize.

“There are huge challenges”, says Jennie Formby, the national officer for Unite’s food, drink and hospitality sector:

“ It is very difficult to organize in hotels and restaurants and pubs because there are thousands of them. How do you actually have a concentrated campaign to cover every site? There’s a very high turnover of

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

labour and large numbers of migrant workers without English as their first language, particularly in hotels, so it is harder to deliver a sustainable organizing campaign.

“It is much easier for us to organize factory workers, for example in meat and poultry processing factories - where we’ve been extremely successful over recent years in organizing thousands of predominantly migrant workers.

“then it is to organize the often almost invisible workforce who work in their thousands in Britain’s hotel sector”. Among the obstacles that the union was up against were the very real threats many workers faced from their employers if they engaged in any kind of union activity, or spoke about the exploitation they were suffering.

Some were threatened with disciplinary action, including outright dismissal. “Our members were basically being robbed of their earnings that customers had chosen to give them as tips to reflect the good service they had received.

But companies saw it as a huge threat to their income if the legislation was changed, as they were making millions out of short-changing these hard-working and low-paid restaurant workers”. However successful as the tips campaign has been in winning for our members, it was actually more about lobbying government and getting changes in the law than it was about organizing workers.

Mary Cunningham’s supermarket boasts a good union presence. When she took over as union rep there were only fifty-one members, but now it has reached 400. This is a testament to her organizational drive. But as she says herself, this is rare.

Since 1996, the percentage of union members in retail has never reached 12 percent. Not a lot, it would seem - but pretty high by service sector standards. Because of the turnover, Mary says, “you’re recruiting just to stand still.

You might recruit thirty people in a matter of months, but by that time people have left - you’re losing them all the time. Obviously when you get successes, it’s easier to recruit, so when people can say, ‘Mary did this, and a worker got their job back’ - that’s a positive thing.”

Again, Mary does not lack stories of management clamping down on unions. “At one big company that’s been around for years, I had a hundred people wanting to join the union. I had a meeting off the premises with two ladies, and they took a hundred forms back and most of them were filled in, until the company found out about it and said anybody that filled in a form on the premises, or caught with a form, would be disciplined”.

After three decades of persecution, unions are no longer part of workplace culture - and that is particularly true of the service sector. “A lot of people today don’t even know what a union is about”, says Mary. “Which is sad, really”.

John McNally has been leading valiant attempts by the PCS union to organize call centre workers. He believes that there are real grounds for optimism, because one key similarity between call centres and old-style factories: large numbers of workers concentrated in one place.

But he has no illusions about the obstacles that are in the way, not least because of how regimented the work is. “You could have four hundred people in a room who may see each other every day but never speak to each other”, he says.

Just as factory workers were stuck at their looms in Victorian times, call centre workers are stuck at their desks. There is one major difference, though: unlike Victorian workers who could shout at each other over their looms, call centre workers have earphones plugged in all day and so are prevented from communicating.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“People are treated like units of production, unlike factories where there is a more organic interaction between people”. Some unions that have been prepared to take action to defend their members have grown, like the transport workers union the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, and a handful of others.

But the reality is that unions continue to shrink in number and barely exist in the service sector. What is particularly scandalous is that those who most need unions are the least represented. According to the 2008 Labour Force Survey, less than 15 percent of workers earning less than £7 an hour are union members.

For those on between £15 and £20 an hour, the proportion is well over four in ten. It is not the unpopularity of trade unionism that is to blame for its crippled state. According to a poll conducted by union group Unions 21, around half of non-unionized workers think that unions have a future, compared to 31 percent who think they do not.

While women were most likely not to join because of the cost, for men the biggest turnoff was that unions, in their sense, did not achieve anything. According to Trades Union Congress organizing officer Carl Roper, unions had not done enough to recruit in the private sector. “There doesn’t seem to be a union approach to how we look at those workers”.

It is not just that the failure of unions to recruit low-paid and moderately paid service sector workers condemns them to poor wages and conditions. It undermines the collective identity of working-class people.

It deprives them of a voice, leaving millions of people virtually invisible and without a means to articulate their concerns and aspirations, which can be easily ignored by politicians and journalists alike. Furthermore, it helps to consolidate the idea that you can only improve your lot through your own individual efforts and that, accordingly, those in poorly paid jobs deserve their lot.

The weakening of trade unions goes a long way to explaining why workers’ pay stagnated even during the boom years. The huge sums being made benefited mostly the bosses, because of the lack of an organized workforce to win a share of the spoils for the millions working some of the longest hours in Europe.

Similarly, this lack of pressure from below explains how workers’ rights have been chipped away, one by one. Even before the recession hit, the wages of working-class Britain were going nowhere fast. In 2005 for example, company profits were the highest since records began, but workers suffered a hit to their weekly earnings of nearly half a percent.

The income at the bottom half flatlined after 2004; for the bottom third, it actually went into reverse. Following the crash in 2008, wage freezes became the norm as workers were left to pick up the tab for a crisis caused by the greed of wealthy bankers.

The 9.4 million people in low-income households had nothing to fall back on in hard times. The decline of their income is all the more shocking because it happened under a Labour government. Compare and contrast with the much-maligned Labour administrations of the 1960s, when the poorest 10 percent saw their real income go up by 29 percent, compared to the 16 percent increase enjoyed by everyone else.

New Labour loyalist and former Cabinet minister Hazel Blears admits that life got harder for working-class people. She argues that the government was trying to “square a circle”, fearing that intervening too much to help struggling workers would make Britain “uncompetitive” and throw people out of work.

“As ever in politics it’s about striking the balance, and sometimes you get that balance right, and sometimes you get it wrong”. What makes all this so spectacularly unfair is that workers’ wages have stagnated even as their productivity has steadily gone up.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

In the past, growing productivity has translated into rising wages. But the annual increase in productivity has been twice that of wages in twenty-first-century Britain. Overall, wages represent a much smaller slice of the economy following the ravages of Thatcherism.

Nearly two-thirds of the nation's wealth went on wages back in 1973. Today, it's only a little over half. It's not just the legacy of Thatcherism that workers have to thank for their stagnating pay packets: globalization has played a role, too.

When China, India and the former Soviet bloc entered the global market economy, Western companies suddenly had access to hundreds of millions of new workers. Not only did this make labour plentiful, it also made it cheap because corporations could get away with paying far lower wages in the developing world, not least because of international deregulation pushed by the likes of the World Trade Organization.

This has dealt a crippling blow to workers' bargaining power. After all, companies can simply relocate to the third world if their Western workforces refuse to stomach low wages and poor conditions. Stagnating wages and low-paid service sector jobs played their part in the economic crisis.

To maintain their spending power, workers began to borrow. In 1980 the ratio between debt and income was 45. By 1997 it had doubled, before reaching an astonishing 157.4 on the eve of the credit crunch in 2007.

As people's purchasing power slowed, more and more credit was splashed out on consumer goods. Between 2000 and 2007, consumers spent £55 billion more than their pay packets, courtesy of the plastic in their wallet or hefty bank loans.

This huge increase in household debt is just one reason Britain experienced a credit-fuelled boom before the bubble inevitably burst. "If you're in a situation where your income is not increasing in real terms, and you actually find yourself in a situation where your income is declining, then one way to meet that gap and "keep up with the Joneses" is to borrow money to do so", says debt expert Chris Tapp.

And that is exactly what millions of people did, borrowing way beyond their means to supplement the gap left by stagnating real wages. Reckless consumerism played its part, too, as credit allowed consumers to splash out on expensive holidays, television, iPhones and so on because, as Tapp puts it:

"Society screams at us: This is what you need, this is what you need to be accepted, this is what you need to be valued". And credit, easy credit, allows you to do this." As well as being poorly paid, many of the service sector jobs have a markedly lower status than the manufacturing jobs they replaced.

Miners and factory workers had a real pride in the work they were doing. Miners were supplying the country's energy needs, factory workers had the satisfaction of investing skill and energy into making things that people needed.

The jobs were well regarded in the local community. Of course, there are many conscientious supermarket and call centre workers who put real effort into their jobs and into providing good customer service.

but there is no doubt that there is not the same pride and prestige attached to their jobs. "Despite the problems of manufacturing industry in the 1970s the workers were very well skilled", says political historian Ross McKibbin. "They were very well paid. They were nearly all unionized. And they had very high levels of pride in work."

"And I think that has declined. In what one might call the industrial working class, the pride in work is less than it used to be, and the effort to have pride in work has declined". Little wonder that in one

survey four out of ten middle-income workers felt that their occupation had a lower status than their father's, compared to only 29 percent who felt that it had a higher status.

Those who are now classified by statisticians as "lower middle class" - like clerical and admin workers and supervisors, for example - are now mostly lower down the income scale than they would have been as members of the skilled working class a generation earlier.

That said, the low status accorded to many non-industrial jobs can be grossly unfair. Part of the problem is that we have developed a distaste for socially useful but poorly paid jobs. This is a spin-off from the new religion of meritocracy, where one's rank in the social hierarchy is supposedly determined on merit.

The New Economics foundation think-tank published a report in 2009 comparing the social value of different occupations. Hospital cleaners are generally on the minimum wage. However, taking into account that they maintain standards of hygiene and contribute to the wider health outcomes - they generated over £10 in social value for every £1 they were paid.

Waste recycling workers are another example. They fulfill all sorts of functions, like preventing waste and promoting recycling, as well as re-using goods and keeping down carbon emissions. For every £1 spent on their wages, another £12 was generated.

But when the think-tank applied the same model to City bankers they estimated that for every £1 they were paid, £7 of social value was destroyed. For advertising executives it was even more: £11 destroyed for every £1 popped into their bank account.

In modern Britain, you may end up having a low-paid, low-status job even though the contribution you are making to society is enormous. This decline in occupational status is just one way the death of manufacturing has undermined the quality of workers' lives and their sense of worth.

Another is that the new service sector jobs simply do not foster the same sense of community as industry once did. "This kind of strong, community-based working-class culture has certainly been reduced very markedly", says sociologist John Goldthorpe, something he noticed from visiting the former pit village where he grew up.

"There used to be the occupational culture of mining, too. Everybody knew about mining. there was talk about mining in pubs and clubs, there was this kind of shared occupational culture as well as the community". The service sector has simply not replicated the sense of belonging and community that manufacturing could foster.

"Society has become increasingly atomized", is former Labour Cabinet Minister Clare Short's verdict. "In the street I grew up in, all the kids played together, they went in and out of the adults' houses, everyone knew roughly who each other were, what they did, and helped each other.

"There were always people in the houses because not so many women worked. It was culturally completely different. And there's been a lot of loss, in my view, in the changes. They're not all for the better, and the sense of community and belonging is massively reduced".

The balance between work and life has also suffered. Four in ten of us put in hours on a Saturday, for example, more than any other EU country. Another bleary-eyed 13 percent work night shifts, again higher than most European countries.

As well as working irregular hours, we spend more time holed up in our workplaces than elsewhere in Europe. The downward trend in working hours skidded to a halt in the 1980s - and has gone the other way. By 2007, full-time workers were putting in an average of 41.4 hours every week, up from 40.7 hours a year earlier.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

In the European Union, only Romanian and Bulgarian workers put in longer hours. Shamefully, Britain negotiated an opt-out from the European Working Time Directive that caps the working week at 48 hours. In theory, workers can only work longer than this if they agree to.

But according to a survey conducted by the Trades Union Congress, one in three workers do not know the option even exists, and another two in three who regularly work more than 48 hours were never given a choice.

We have ended up in the shocking situation in which around one in five of us regularly work more than the 48 hours enshrined in the Directive. But there is even more damning evidence of exploitation. In 2009, over five million workers did more than seven hours of unpaid overtime on average each week - and the trend is up.

Having so many people working for free is worth a huge amount to bosses. According to the T U C, business made a stunning £27.4 billion out of it - that's £5,402 per worker. It is a figure worth recalling the next time you hear businesses complaining about the cost of sick leave: according to the C B I, the resulting losses are less than half the amount.

We are not even compensated with time away to unwind. British workers get an average of 24.6 leave days a year, below the European Union average and well below Sweden's thirty-three days. No wonder stress has become endemic. A fifth of workers surveyed by the mental health charity Mind had phoned in sick on some occasion because of "unmanageable" stress levels.

We have seen how service sector workers in particular have had an increasingly rough ride over recent years. But what about the one in five who work in the public services? After all, both right-wing journalists and politicians have encouraged the idea that public sector workers are over paid, underworked, and living it up at the expense of the taxpayer.

When the government bailed out the banking system and suffered a collapse in tax revenues from the city, a political consensus developed around "savage" cuts to public services. The reality of Britain's six million public sector workers is nowhere to be seen in all of this.

"Going back many, many years, people may have seen this image of white-collar workers who perhaps thought they were doing alright, had quite an easy job, good conditions and were fairly well paid", says union leader Mark Serwotka.

"I think the caricature has been deliberately put out there by all political parties in order to, firstly, justify attacking them, and secondly, trying to spread a very divisive image.

Serwotka believes this "demonization of the public sector was a deliberate political strategy to try and see off any opposition to the massive cuts they announced". He bitterly recalls the then Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown sacking 100,000 civil servants on live television in 2004.

The union was not even consulted beforehand. "We saw Michael Howard at the 2005 election with his 500 cardboard cut-outs of bowler-hatted, pin-striped mandarins, and it's the same story". When the Tories came to power after the 2010 election, they immediately set to work cultivating this image, harping on the 172 civil servants who were paid more than the prime minister as if they were in any way representative of the public sector.

Like the service sector, the public sector has filled part of the vacuum left by the collapse of industry in many working-class communities. Nearly 850,000 new public sector jobs were created in the New Labour era. There were around six million public sector workers before the conservative-led coalition unveiled its programme of cuts in May 2010.

Again, as in services, women dominate. According to economics expert Professor Prem Sikka, eight out of every ten new jobs taken by women since the late 1990s were in public services. In a former industrial heartland like the North East, around one in two women work in the public sector.

The idea that these employees are in any way pampered is a myth. Nearly a quarter of workers earning less than £7 an hour can be found in the public sector. “We have 100,000 members in the civil service earning £15,000 a year or less”, says Mark Serwotka.

We have 80,000 people on less than the average wage in the country in the civil service. We’re told that they have “gold-plated” pensions yet the average pension of all civil servants is £6,200 a year. If you strip out the top mandarins, it’s £4,000 a year”.

Consider, too, the fact that public sector workers do the equivalent of 120 million hours of unpaid overtime a year. One in four public sector workers put in unpaid overtime worth almost £9 billion a year, compared to one in six in the private sector.

Pampered? On the contrary. Public sector workers rank among some of the most exploited low-paid people in the country. It is these workers who face the brunt of the cuts programme, because a crisis of private greed has been cynically transformed into a crisis in the public sector spending.

But as politicians sharpen the knives, it will not just be those workers directly employed by the state who will suffer. If you are in the bottom fifth of the population, over half your income comes from state support. In the fifth above that, it is still over a third.

Even in the middle fifth, 17 percent of people’s income comes from the government. Huge numbers of working-class people depend on having their income topped up by the state to make ends meet - through tax credits and housing and child benefits, for instance, many of which face real-term cuts.

The great, continuing legacy of Thatcherism is that the working class is, for the time being, on the losing side of the class war. “There’s class warfare alright”, as multi-billionaire American investor Warren Buffet put it a few years ago, “but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making the war, and we’re winning”.

Over recent years we have witnessed an astonishing wealth grab by Britain’s businesses at the expense of their workforces. At the turn of the millennium, top bosses took home forty-seven times the average worker’s wage.

By 2008, they were earning ninety four times more. In some companies, this gap has become mind-bendingly wide. Take Bart Becht, chief executive of Reckitt Benckiser, which makes everything from the painkiller Nurofen to the household cleaning product Cilit Bang.

Lucky old Mr Becht makes do with the equivalent income of 1,374 of his workers put together. Or behold Tesco boss Terry Leahy, pocketing 900 times more than his checkout workers and shelf-stackers. You might think that the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s would have given major businessmen pause for thought.

Not for long, though. In October 2008, it was revealed that boardroom pay had soared by 55 percent in just a year, leaving the average Footsie 100 chief executive with a wage packet 200 times that of the average worker.

This bonanza did not stop them pressing ahead with pay freezes and mass redundancies. And when the Sunday Times published their annual rich List in 2010, it revealed that the collective wealth of the 1,000 richest people in Britain had increased by 30 percent.

This was the biggest rise in the history of the Rich List. Call centre worker Carl Leishman recalls being made redundant by his former employer at the height of the financial crisis. “I was in the interesting position of working for a bank when it all kicked off.

“The whole thing is the reason I got made redundant. I think the day after I officially finished with the bank they announced £8.3 billion profits. That stung a little”.

Such is the extreme distribution of wealth that the top 1 percent scoffs a hefty 23 percent slice of the national pie. The bottom half, on the other hand, has to make do with a meagre 6 percent between them. Even this is misleading, because much of the “wealth” of the bottom half is borrowed, through mortgages and credit. The top 1 percent owns its wealth outright.

The “trickle-up” model of economics has not come about because the people at the top have become more talented or more profitable. It has been driven by the smashing of trade unions, a hire-and-fire labour force, and a tax system rigged to benefit the wealthy.

Even Jeremy Warner, a right-winger and deputy editor of the conservative newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, finds something amiss: “It is as if a small elite has captured - and kept for itself - all the spectacular benefits that capitalism is capable of producing”.

“There’s no doubt that the current tax system is regressive”, says chartered accountant Richard Murphy. After all, we live in a country where the top decile pay less tax as a proportion of income than the bottom decile. Murphy identifies a number of reasons, including the fact that poorer people spend more of their income on indirect taxes like VAT; that National Insurance is capped at around £40,000; and that those earning between £70,000 and £100,000 a year can claim £5,000 of tax relief a year over and above their personal allowance.

“We are intensely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich”, New Labour’s high priest, Peter Mandelson, once said, “as long as they pay their taxes”. In practice, wealthy businessmen and corporations go to great lengths to avoid paying taxes at all.

Murphy calculates that tax evasion costs the Treasury around £70 billion a year - that’s seventy times more than the estimates of benefit fraud. With armies of lawyers and tax experts, the economic elite has become skilled at exploiting loopholes and shuffling money about to avoid paying a penny.

“There’s some quite blatant activity, particularly within the middle class and the wealthy, where there’s a lot of income splitting going on”, he says. “Tax shifting by moving income from one part within the relationship to another has become an extremely common way of avoiding significant amounts of tax.

The self-employed are also masters at this through limited companies”. What better example than Philip Green, a British billionaire businessman appointed by the Conservative government to advise on its spending review.

Sir Philip gets away with paying no tax in Britain because he has given his Monaco-based wife legal ownership of key companies such as top-shop. Looking beyond the statistics for a moment, clearly we are dealing with two groups of people with irreconcilable differences.

On the one hand those who scrimp and save, rely on often poor and stagnating wages to pay the rent or the mortgage. Their long hours and growing productivity has gone unrewarded. They send their kids to local schools and when they get ill, they depend on the local GP and hospital.

They pay their taxes. With the death of industrial Britain, many of them depend on relatively low-paid, insecure service sector jobs. Their needs and concerns are ignored by the middle-class worlds of politics and media.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

On the other hand we have a wealthy elite whose bank accounts have exploded in value, even in the midst of the economic meltdown. They live global, jet-setting lifestyles, with mansions, villas and penthouse suites scattered around the globe.

They may work hard and for long hours, but can be paid as much in a day as other hard-working people earn in a month. Many of them pay little or no tax, they send their kids to expensive private schools and use costly private health-care schemes.

They have opted out of society. Not that this has dented their power and influence. After all, the tentacles of big business reach far into each of the main political parties. As well as their huge political power, it is this rich elite who run our major newspapers and broadcasters.

The idea that the working class has withered away, with just a “chav” rump left, is a politically convenient myth. But there is no denying that it has changed profoundly over the last three decades. The old working class tended to thrive in communities based around the workplace.

Most were men who had the same job for life, which was very likely to be the same as their father and grandfather before them. Many of these jobs had genuine prestige, and were well paid. People were more likely than not to be members of unions, and enjoyed genuine power in the workplace.

The modern working class resembles the old in one respect: it is made up of those who work for others and lack power over their own labour. But the jobs they do are generally cleaner and require less brawn: how fast you type is more important than how much you can lift.

They work in offices, shops, call centres, often for relatively less pay and with greater job insecurity. Even before the Great Recession wages were stagnating, or, in many cases, declining. Millions of workers hop from job to job with an ever-growing frequency.

A sense of community, belonging and pride in work has been stripped away. Terms and conditions are often poor, particularly for the army of temps who enjoy virtually no rights whatsoever. Entire swathes of the workforce are non-unionized, and labour's bargaining power is weaker than ever.

A blue-uniformed male factory worker with a union card in his pocket might have been an appropriate symbol for the working class of the 1950s. A low-paid, part time, female shelf-stacker would certainly not be unrepresentative of the same class today.

But this contemporary working class is almost absent from our television screens, the speeches of our politicians and the comment pages of our newspapers. Tory leader David Cameron spoke of the “Great Ignored” during the 2010 general election.

Who has better qualifications for this label than the British working class? There is an insidious side to the pretense the class no longer exists in Britain. Rarely a day goes by without some politician or commentator paying homage to “meritocracy”, or the idea that anyone with talent and drive can make it big in modern Britain.

The tragic irony is that the myth of the classless society gained ground just as society became more rigged in favour of the middle class. Britain remains as divided by class as it ever was.

A Rigged Society

“I’m definitely middle class, but I’m married to a man who’s upper class”, Rachel Johnson said in the same cut-glass accent as her brother Boris. Johnson has been the editor of *Lady* magazine since 2009, but even a woman with her privileged background feels as though she lives in a different world from its blue-blooded readership.

“I’m sort of on the tectonic plates, at the grinding plate of two class systems. It’s like the San Andreas Fault in British society, which is between the aspirant middle class and the downwardly mobile aristocracy.”

Rachel Johnson may not seem the most likely person to offer a searing indictment of the class system. But that is what she does. What we have seen, she argues, “are the middle classes sort of sailing into the jobs, taking all the glittering prizes as a result of their contacts and peer group. And the working-class or the lower-middle-class children struggling to get their first foot even on the ladder”.

At the root of the problem, she says, is the “nepotistic way that British society operates”. “All middle-class parents do is go around sorting out jobs and work experience for their offspring with their mates. The one thing that the middle class are really good at is survival. They never lose out.

“If you look at how they work systems - the NHS, the state education system, they’re the ones who are going to win, because they’re prepared to put in everything”. Johnson’s fear is that cuts - which she knows are going to be brutal - will make this imbalance a whole lot worse:

“This is going to inevitably entrench the middle classes and the upper middle classes in their positions of power and influence, because they have the money to have their children living at home with them, they have the money to support children through unpaid work experience, which can go on for years.

“To support them through university without saddling them with student loans, which means when they approach employment they can pick and choose a bit more than those who come into adulthood or the post-training period with huge debts.

“The playing field has not levelled, it has become... I don’t know what the opposite of levelled is. It has become much less fair, less of a straight playing field”. When I asked her how class divisions could be overcome, her solution was rather surprising for a woman of her background:

“You probably have to abolish private schools, and introduce a French system where everybody goes to the same school. It’s easy! But no one’s going to do it. We can’t do it in a free society. We should do it for the sake of everybody.”

Rachel Johnson can hardly be accused of having an axe to grind. She is no left-wing hammer of the middle classes: she finds Margaret Thatcher “inspirational”. She is simply being honest about the class she was born into.

But her analysis puts her at odds with politicians and commentators who believe that inequalities are explained by a lack of aspiration among working-class people. The reality is that we live in a society rigged in favour of the middle class at every level.

As Johnson underlines, private schools are one of the most obvious ways the wealthy can buy their offspring a guaranteed place at the top table. They are the training grounds for the British ruling class. Only seven out of every hundred Britons is educated privately, but they are disproportionately represented in every major profession.

Nearly half of top civil servants were privately educated, as were 70 percent of finance directors, over half the top journalists and close to seven out of ten top barristers. The same goes for top universities. Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

According to the Sutton Trust, one hundred elite schools accounted for a third of admissions to Oxbridge over the last few years. Overall, over half of Oxbridge students went to fee-paying schools.

But class can dictate people's life chances in rather more subtle ways than effectively buying your kids better grades. Only 15 percent of poor white boys and 20 percent of poor white girls leave state schools with basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic.

This is way behind middle class kids. Why is the link between education and class so strong? If you believe the former chief inspector of schools, Chris Woodhead, it is because middle-class children have "better genes".

This perverse Social Darwinism led him to criticize ministers for thinking that they could make children "brighter than God made them. Life isn't fair. We're never going to make it fair". Of course, this theory is as ludicrous as it is offensive.

It is the cards stacked against working-class kids that are to blame, not their genetic make-up. "It's largely because the gap opens up so early on and then it never closes again", says leading educational campaigner Fiona Millar.

Having the luck to be born into a comfortable background has a huge impact. A 2005 study showed that a five-year-old whose parents earn more than £67,500 has reading skills four months more advanced than those of her peers in families with combined incomes of between £15,000 and £30,000.

For those in households getting between £2,500 and £15,000, the difference is more than five months. Once established, this disparity follows children all the way through school. A fifth of all boys eligible for school meals do not obtain five or more G C S Es, compared to around 8 percent for everybody else.

Why is there such a disparity from infancy on? A lot of it is down to what Fiona Millar calls a "horrible phase": "Cultural Capital". This means having parents who, thanks to their own middle-class background, themselves enjoyed a better education, probably to degree level; being exposed to their wider vocabulary, being surrounded by books when you are growing up, in an environment where going to university is the "done thing" and the logical first step to a seemingly inevitable professional career - those sorts of things.

As former Labour Cabinet minister Clare Short puts it, there "used to be many more routes to a dignified life with a decent income for children who were not particularly academic at school". Or in the words of a report published by the National Union of Teachers: "Thirty years ago a fourteen or fifteen year old working class young person could walk out of school and into a decent working-class job. That is no longer the case".

The demise of the old manufacturing industries means that having good educational qualifications is more important than ever. And of course, middle-class people, with their abundance of cultural capital, are in a much better position to achieve that.

For insight into how class impacts on a child's education, I spoke to Helena Button. "Most of the parents tended to have some kind of work, but it was very low paid, like shops, local industry, or whatever was about".

helena recalls: "I remember that a lot of these kids, they had no aspiration. But you'd have to be pretty amazing to come from a working class background and aspire to something different. I don't know if I ever reached those kids of people". Try as they might, she feels, many of the parents of working class kids with learning difficulties struggled to help them:

“Fathers often had learning difficulties themselves, so they weren’t able to help their kids. People from educated, middle-class backgrounds have parents who can help and encourage them with their homework”.

Contrast the opportunities I had to those of Liam Cranley, who grew up in Urmston, on the edges of Greater Manchester, in the 1980s and 1990s. His dad worked in a factory that once employed hundreds of workers in Trafford Park but, along with several others in the area, has since closed; his mother went through various low-paid jobs:

“All of my friends were pretty similar to me, they had pretty similar backgrounds,” he says. “Everybody else was in the same position, in that the parents said: “Get a trade behind you! Maybe do an apprenticeship - but make sure you get a trade behind you”. If we had aspirations, it would be to get an apprenticeship, if you were smart”.

The trouble was that these trades were vanishing fast, as large swathes of British industry collapsed. For parents who had grown up in hardship, the priority was making sure that their children could stand on their own two feet.

“Our parents’ biggest aspiration for us was that we had a job, that we could provide, because that really was something to aspire to. When my dad grew up they had nothing”.

The idea of going to university was not even within the realms of imagination. “I’m not exaggerating here: I literally didn’t know what university was aged sixteen”, Liam recalls. “University, to be honest, was kind of where posh people go! It wasn’t a case of aspiration, it was almost, “you know your place”.

“That’s what posh people do; it’s just not an option. It’s just not what we do, it’s just not on the radar. The aspiration thing is bullshit, it really is. You can only ever really aspire to something if you know it and understand it”.

With the exception of photography, Liam failed all of his G C S Es. “I didn’t even go back to school to get my results”, he says. For six years, he worked as a printer in a factory. “It was horrible. I hated it, every minute of it, because it was just monotonous and soul-destroying and boring. I came very close to having a breakdown. Eventually I just walked out”.

But Liam is an exceptional case. Aged twenty-three, he started an Access course specially designed for mature students with ambitions to go to university. “It was a confidence-building exercise”, he explains, recalling how he initially struggled with basic spelling and grammar.

Yet his ability was such that he ended up studying at the University of Sheffield, one of the best in the country. Surrounded by middle-class students for the first time, he suffered from constant “imposter syndrome”: a sense that he did not deserve to be there and would be found out at any moment.

It meant sometimes dealing with patronizing or even outright classist sentiments, even if meant in jest: for example, he recalls one friend introducing him as “my scally friend from Manchester”. It is difficult not to be impressed by Liam’s achievement.

But the reality is that very few children with his background ever make it to university, let alone somewhere like Sheffield: indeed, nobody he grew up with took that path. Politicians and media commentators who focus on an alleged lack of aspiration among working-class kids often miss the point.

Aspire to what? The disappearance of so many good, well paid working class jobs in communities across the country means it is difficult to see what lies at the end of school - other than supermarkets or call centres.

What struck Fiona Millar in her interviews with schoolchildren from more disadvantaged backgrounds is that they “often don’t know why they’re there, because they don’t see the benefit from it. The parents don’t really understand if there’s a benefit from it, or they can’t convey it to them necessarily... their expectations are dampened down”.

This is particularly true for communities that were badly hit by the collapse of industry. “The areas that have the biggest problems and the most demoralized schools are very often the areas where a lot of people were thrown out of work in the 1980s. Whether it was steel, coal... There are no male role models, men haven’t worked, kids don’t see any future for themselves., they don’t see the point in education, because you can’t see a job at the end of it. Why would you bother with it?”

To huge numbers of working-class kids, education simply does not seem relevant. No wonder they are far more likely to truant. There are 300 schools in Britain in which one in ten pupils skip school for at least one day a week.

In some schools, the figure is as high as one in four. One estimate has around half a million young people on unauthorized absence from school each week. Working class students are far more likely to truant than their better-off peers.

It represents a tragic lack of confidence on their part in the ability of education to be even remotely relevant to their lives. The problem is that parents and children who are cynical about education have something of a point.

More and more university graduates are forced to take relatively humble jobs - never mind those teenagers who stay on to do A-levels and leave it at that. Newcastle supermarket worker Mary Cunningham told me about the growing numbers of graduates working on the checkout.

“There’s people who’ve gone to university, got their degrees, and can’t find anything else”, she says. Government advice published in 2009 recommended graduates look at “entry-level positions in retail and hospitality, or call centres.

“You could have more and more people with higher-level qualifications in relatively low-level jobs, and with relatively low-level earnings”, says sociologist John Goldthorpe. One senior Tory politician has spoken to him about his fears of “a kind of underemployed intelligentsia who could get very radicalized”.

Things are looking even bleaker as the axe falls on the public sector. For years, it has been the most popular choice for students fresh from graduation ceremonies. The fundamental issue is: if you are unlikely to obtain a secure, well-paid job even after years of studying, why bother at all? If you are going to end up working in a shop regardless, it is understandable that slaving away at school for years seems like a waste of time.

If we want kids with “aspiration”, we need to give them something to aspire to. Separating children by class also has an impact on their learning. Fiona Millar points out that there is a highly segregated education system in large swathes of the country, particularly by the time pupils finish primary school.

“If you go to the independent sector they get totally different experiences, like small class sizes and more resources”, she says. “In fact, they’re the ones who need it least in a way”. Millar points out that this is damaging because having a balanced intake is crucial when it comes to educational attainment and successful schools.

“The real double whammy is if you come from a disadvantaged background and you live in a very disadvantaged community, where there is no social mix at all. I think that can be a very negative and downward spiral”. And the problem then is that schools that cater exclusively for poor, working-class kids end up being, as he puts it, “demonized”.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Middle-class parents have all sorts of tricks up their sleeves to get their kids into the best schools. Other parents pretend to find God a a blandishment to a high-performing faith school. And the privileged can pay to top up their children's education by hiring private tutors.

Rachel Johnson says, when it comes to looking after their own, there are no lengths the sharp-elbowed middle-class will not go. Millar believes that segregation at such a young age facilitates the development of hostility to working-class individuals and communities.

“If you've been to a school with lots of different kids, and you've got your friends from a huge circle, then all that demonization of poor children, or children from different races, is broken down”. This segregation is to get worse.

The Conservative government is building on New Labour's introduction of competition and market principles into education. “There is this stupid assumption by people who think of themselves as New Labour”, says former Labour leader Neil Kinnock,

“that if they put schools in competition with each other, the result will be a better product. Now that might apply to baked beans or even fur coats, certainly cars and telephone design, but bullshit when it's applied to schools! Because no one starts from the same place.”

Kinnock, who after all paved the way for New Labour, finds this to be “worse than idiotic. It's wrong. Fundamentally bad”. As right-wing Swedish Education Minister, Bertil Ostberg admitted: “We have actually seen a fall in the quality of Swedish schools since the free schools were introduced”. All they achieved was more segregation.

“The free schools are generally attended by children of better educated and wealthy families, making things even more difficult for children attending ordinary schools in poor areas... Most of our free schools have ended up being run by companies for profit”.

Instead, he urged politicians to focus on improving teaching quality across the board. But as Fiona Millar strongly insists, school is merely one factor. “The best estimate I have ever seen of the school effect is 20 percent of the outcome in children”.

For her, factors like “residential geography and housing, peer pressure, educational attainment of the parents, ability of the parents to support their learning” are, taken together, far more important to a child's educational success.

Education expert Gillian Evans agrees, arguing that the prospects of a working-class child are dramatically increased by things like safe streets to play in and good schools and housing; supportive families, whatever the structure they may take; good local services; and a strong local economy with a wide range of decent working-class jobs.

This is why the calls of some Tory right-wingers for the reintroduction of academic selection are so misguided. The Tory MP David Davis takes “the view that the demise of the grammar school did massive damage to the levels of social mobility in the country”.

The argument is that grammar schools gave bright working-class kids the opportunity to thrive. John Goldthorpe disputes the perception that social mobility has, overall, declined: for men it has stagnated, but for women it has increased.

But Davis also argues that “nearly every education system in the world except ours selects on academic ability one way or another”, overlooking the fact that 164 grammar schools remain, and the Finnish education system - generally ranked the world's best has no element of selection.

In any case, the old British grammar schools were overwhelmingly middle class, and huge numbers of working-class children were written off as failures in the old secondary moderns.

The truth is that because of the other important factors that condition a child's educational achievement, the old grammar schools did not even necessarily help the working class kids who got in. A government report in 1954 showed that, of around 16,000 grammar school pupils from semi-skilled and unskilled families, around 9,000 failed to get three passes at O-level.

Out of these children, around 5,000 left school before the end of their fifth year. Only one in twenty got two A-levels. Conversely, recent research has shown that middle-class kids who attend struggling inner-city comprehensives do much, much better than their fellow students.

This is because in a class-divided society, the school you attend is one factor among many. The decisive issue is class. All of us end up paying for an education system segregated by class. According to a report by a world-leading management consultancy, the whole of society foots the bill for "Britain's rigid class system", due to the "loss of economic potential caused by children born into poorly educated, low income families."

The price they put on it was more than £50 billion a year. With so many advantages from birth, it is no wonder that middle class kids go on to dominate top universities. According to a report by the Office for Fair Access, intelligent children from England's richest fifth are seven times more likely to go on to university than intelligent children from the poorest 40 percent.

This is up from six times as likely in the mid 1990s. As you move up the rankings toward Oxbridge at the summit, the imbalance grows. The middle-class domination of education is just one way the privileged protect their own interests.

Kids from privileged backgrounds also disproportionately benefit from their parents' networks and contacts. Many get into desirable jobs as much through recommendations and friends of friends as through their qualifications. Could a working-class kid from Liverpool or Glasgow even dream of this kind of leg-up?

But nothing has done more to turn major professions into a closed shop for the middle classes as the rise of the intern. Unpaid internships are thriving, particularly in professions like politics, law, and media and fashion. According to a recent survey of 1,500 students and graduates, two-thirds of young people feel obliged to work for free because of the recession.

For many, internship can follow internship, with paid jobs dangled like carrots but never offered. This is not just exploitation. It means that only well-heeled youngsters living with mum and dad can take this first step in the hunt for a paid job.

MPs might speak passionately about "social mobility" from the podium, but they are among the worst offenders. Parliamentary interns provide 18,000 hours of free labour a week, saving MPs £5 million a year in labour costs.

According to the parliamentary researchers' union Unite, less than one in every hundred interns receives the minimum wage, and almost half do not even get expenses. The rise of unpaid work is why, if you are a working-class kid with dreams of becoming a lawyer, you may as well forget it.

A report by Young Legal Aid Lawyers published in 2010 revealed that, because of requirements for unpaid work experience and subsidized training opportunities, much of the law was a no-go area for working class people.

What makes this so perverse is that legal aid exists to help people who cannot afford to pay for legal advice. “It’s already quite unusual to find legal aid lawyers who come from unprivileged backgrounds”, said Laura Janes, the chair of Young Legal Aid Lawyers.

“There is a danger that legal aid will become a ‘ladies who lunch’ - type occupation. Legal aid lawyers are often representing the most underprivileged people in society. A lot of the young people I work with don’t understand what their lawyers are saying to them because they come from completely different backgrounds”.

In sum, it is scarcely surprising that many major professions are out of bounds to the working class. Today’s professional born in 1970 would have grown up enjoying a family income that was 27 percent above the average.

But the story with some individual professions is even more disturbing. Take the media,. Journalists and broadcasters born in 1958 typically grew up in families with an income of around 5.5 percent above the average. But, for the next generation born in 1970, the gap has widened to a stunning 42.4 percent.

This is not to say that social mobility would be the answer to all the problems of working-class Britain. After all, even if there were a few thousand more lawyers who hailed from places like inner-city Liverpool, the vast majority of people would remain in working-class jobs.

But, as well as being manifestly unfair, the unrepresentative social composition of the professions ensures that Britain remains dominated by an Establishment from the narrowest of backgrounds. The result is a society run by the middle class, for the middle class.

We have seen some of the subtler ways in which the class system is propped up. But underpinning all these factors, of course, is wealth. A study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2010 revealed that in Britain, a father’s income has a bigger role in determining how much his son will earn than in any other developed country.

Indeed, the link between a father’s background and his son’s future is three times greater here than in social-democratic countries such as Norway or Denmark. Thus, in Britain, half of the economic advantage that a high-earning father has over a low-earning father is passed on to their offspring.

If you take Canada or a Nordic country the figure is just 20 percent. Being born into a prosperous middle-class family typically endows you with a safety net for life. If you are not naturally very bright, you are still likely to go far, and at the very least, will never experience poverty as an adult.

A good education compounded by your parents’ “cultural capital”, financial support and networks will always see you through. If you are a bright child born into a working-class family, you do not have any of these things. The odds are that you will not be better off than your parents. Britain’s class system is like an invisible prison.

The demonization of working people is a grimly rational way to justify an irrational system. Demonize them, ignore their concerns - and rationalize a grossly unequal distribution of wealth and power as a fair reflection of people’s worth and abilities.

But this demonization has an even more pernicious agenda. A doctrine of personal responsibility is applied to a whole range of social problems affecting certain working-class communities - whether it be poverty, unemployment or crime.

In Broken Britain, the victims have only themselves to blame.

Broken Britain

Mrs Parry is a woman battered by events that were outside her control. I met her in the centre of Ashington, a 27,000-strong community about seventeen miles north of Newcastle. It was the world's biggest mining village until the pit closed in 1986, just a year after the defeat of the miner's strike. Thousands were thrown out of work; the community has never recovered.

When I asked Mrs Parry what impact the pit's closure had on the community, she said "We died". "Once all the mines were closed, all the community had gone. It's just been a big depression ever since, just struggling to survive, that's all".

Both her father and her then-husband were miners. They split up the year he lost his job. "We owed not just our livelihoods, but our lives to the pits as well." Take away the heart of a community and it will wilt and begin to die.

"The community just disintegrated", says Mrs Parry. "There was just nothing left for nobody. They tried to fetch various works up to the industrial estate, but every one's just left after two or three years. Loads and loads of men over forty-five never worked again, because they were too old".

When the jobs disappeared, families began to fall apart. I asked her about the impact on working men's self esteem when they were thrown out of their jobs. "It was tremendous! There were a lot of divorces after the pits closed. They'd been together for twenty, thirty years. They just split up because the men weren't useful hanging around the house with nothing to do. Nowhere to go! I mean there was nothing. And we're losing all our social clubs now because the money wasn't there, and the older generation that kept it going is dying off".

I ask her what jobs there are for young people. "There's nothing! My son's twenty-four now and he joined the army because there was nothing. His dream was to be a barman, and he went to the college, and he did silver service and all the training that's around for barmen. And he got jobs, but then they laid him off".

Before the Army, the only option for her son was to join the ranks of Britain's huge hire-and-fire temporary workforce with its insecure terms and conditions. "He tried the factories, but that was no good because a lot of the factories around here - you're put in by somebody else. Agencies! And it meant that he could be working for two weeks solid, and then not work for six weeks. Just had to wait until he got a phone call".

She has two daughters. One works in Asda, the other is a teenage girl who is expecting her first child. "It wasn't really a shock", she said. "I keep trying to think - it's my first grandson she's having! But I just can't get as excited as I was about my other daughter's child".

She was in no doubt about who was to blame for trashing her community. "We've just been totally abandoned. Maggie Thatcher put the knife in and they just left us to bleed to death". Further down the road I found Robert, a middle-aged man sitting alone on a bench, staring miserably into the distance.

"I've been on long-term sick for years", he told me. "Jobs are bad up here". For thirteen years he worked in an open cast mine until it closed a couple of decades ago. "I was on the dole for a long time and, as I say, I come down with long term sick and I haven't worked since.

"Even my son - he's a joiner and a kitchen fitter - he got made redundant a year and a half ago. He can't even get work, and he's got a trade! They're offering him jobs like Asda, you know, just really badly paid jobs. He's got three kids, he can't afford those jobs"

Those I met who had jobs felt lucky, but anxious and insecure. Rachel is a woman in her twenties: her dad was a builder, her grandfather was a miner. "It's hard for jobs around here", she said. "there's very little going on at the minute. I suppose people work up at Main Street."

Many people she knows are out of work. "I'm not even saying people who don't have skills or qualifications. People that do have the qualifications and skills, there's just no jobs to put them into". Rachel works for Northumberland County Council, the biggest employer in the country.

Just weeks before I spoke to her, the council had announced that one in seven workers could face the sack. "We have been briefed and there's a chance there'll be job cuts in our offices, and I suppose the offices we work with as well.

"So I know that we're very closely watching what happens with that". She fears for the future. "I think that because there's not the jobs at the moment, the fact that they're definitely planning to cut at least one person from our office and possibly more is a worry."

I asked her if she had noticed things like drugs and crime in her local community. "I would say that over the years it seems to get a little bit worse here", she says. "I don't know what that's to do with, personally. Possibly, I think that the lack of jobs made people find other ways, I suppose, to spend time doing something or to make money".

It would be wrong of me to portray Ashington as some sort of post-apocalyptic hellhole or as a society in total meltdown. There's a real community spirit in the air. People are warm towards one another. Communities like Ashington were devastated by the whirlwind of de-industrialization unleashed by Thatcherism, but people do their best to adjust and get on with their lives, even in the toughest circumstances.

Father Ian Jackson has been the local Catholic priest in Ashington since 2002. "It's a very warm, caring kind of community. People really look out for each other," he told me. "I think it was hit badly with the closure of the mines - there's very little work for people, so it's quite deprived in a lot of ways. But the people, I always find, are very, very caring and generous".

A number of Filipinos have moved in to the area and, although he says there was hostility towards them to begin with, "that's all died a death". But Father Jackson could not help but notice the terrible impact the lack of jobs had on Ashington's young.

"For a lot of the younger people, you feel most of them want to move on and move out because there's nothing for them here! The main industry, I would probably say - you're looking at the big Asda that's just been built, and the hospital".

The resulting despair was a major cause of anti-social behavior. A nearby pub that was recently closed because of drugs was a particular source of anti-social behaviour. It's not just Britain's former pit villages that have been devastated by the collapse of industry.

The Longbridge plant in Birmingham was one of the biggest industrial complexes in the world. It sustained the local community throughout the twentieth century. But when carmakers M G Rover collapsed in 2005, more than 6,000 workers were thrown on to the dole queue.

Although Chinese automobile company Nanjing brought up the remaining assets, fewer than 200 people have jobs. The collapse of Rover has had a similar impact on the local community as the closure of the mines had on Ashington.

At Longbridge there are a number of boarded up houses next to the train station. Several middle-aged men were out on and about on a Wednesday mid-afternoon. IN the neighbouring Northfield, where many

of the long bridge workers lived, the rather grand looking Old Mill pub has been abandoned, its windows smashed and its walls covered in graffiti.

Don is the manager of the Greenlands Select Social Club in Longbridge. He describes a community with its heart ripped out. “An awful lot of people went to the wall when the plant closed”, he says. The Social club took quite a hit.

“The takings went down about £3000 a week. You don’t see as many people out. I mean, you used to get sixty to a hundred in the club in the evening. You don’t get twenty now”.

For some of those who lost their jobs, the desperation has been too much. “We’ve lost a few friends, who’ve committed suicide. Ex-Rover workers. All this crap that they’ve got the help and whatever. It’s a load of rubbish. They’ve had nothing!”

Payouts of between £5000 and £6000 were promised to sacked workers from the Employee Trust Fund but, as legal wangles continue, workers have not been paid a penny. According to Gemma Cartwright, the chair of the Rover Community Action Trust: “There have been house repossessions and family break-ups over this”.

In the five years since the Longbridge closure, there has been desperately little work for the men. Many of those lucky enough to find a job have had to accept lower-paid, service sector work. There are a lot of similar themes in Ashington and Longbridge.

There is the same sense of despair and pessimism about the future. There are the same stories about the shattering effects locally of the collapse of industrial Britain, and its role in issues as disparate as relationship breakdown, anti-social behaviour, drugs and teenage pregnancy.

In both communities there is a lack of good, secure jobs and plenty of people out of work through no fault of their own. It would clearly be absurd to blame the local people for the almost inevitable problems caused by the crippling events that have befallen their communities.

But tell that to the politicians. At the centre of the Conservative Party’s election campaign in 2010 was the idea of “Broken Britain”: the belief that, as Tory leader David Cameron phrased it, Britain had fallen into a “social recession”.

When two young boys from disturbed backgrounds were indefinitely detained for torturing two younger victims in another mining village, Edlington, Cameron seized on the case as evidence. The case could not be dismissed as an “isolated incident of evil”, he argued.

A whole range of issues were identified as part of the Tory narrative, such as “family breakdown, welfare dependency, failing schools, crime, and the problems that we see in too many of our communities”. Cameron did not identify the collapse of industry as having any role in these kinds of social problems.

“Why is our society broken?”, he asked rhetorically. His own answer to this would have surprised the people of Ashington and Longbridge: “Because government got too big, did too much and undermined responsibility”.

That the economies of communities like Ashington and Longbridge, right across the country, have been obliterated is apparently irrelevant. The chilly winds of the free market ignored; it is the overbearing state that has taken away people’s sense of responsibility.

And now, they are told, people in these communities must start to take individual responsibility for what has happened to them. The social problems that undoubtedly affect many working-class communities have come to define the “chav” caricature.

Teenagers pushing strollers, jobs, feckless adults: this is what chaves are for many people. The media, popular entertainment and the political establishment have gone out of their way to convince us that these are moral issues, an indiscipline that needs to be rectified.

In blaming the victims, the real issues behind social problems like drugs, crime and anti-social behavior have been intentionally obscured. Symptoms have been confused with causes. The communities that suffer most are the biggest victims of the class war unleashed by Thatcherism.

When commentators talk in dehumanizing terms about the “underclass”, they are lumping together those sections of the working class that took the brunt of the wrenching social and economic changes of the last three decades.

After all, the working class has never been homogenous. There have always been different groups within it, not all of whom have sat comfortably together: the skilled and the unskilled, those who once lived in slums and those in quality housing, the unemployed and the employed, the poor and the relatively prosperous, the Northern and the Southern, the English, the Welsh and the Scottish.

But there’s no denying that many of the modern divisions within working-class Britain were forged by the neoliberal economic project of the last thirty years. Ashington and Longbridge are far from being exceptional. “The old industrial heartlands have never recovered”, says the Guardian’s economics editor, Larry Elliott.

“One way of looking at it, which is entirely spurious, is to look at claimant-count unemployment, which has come down to an extent. But once you unpack that, you find that a lot of those jobs have tended to be part-time, in distribution, and haven’t been as well paid as the jobs that were lost”.

Claimant count only measures the numbers receiving Jobseeker’s allowance. But that is just a part of the total. According to the government’s Labour Force Survey, less than half of those lacking but wanting a job were officially classed as unemployed even before the recession hit.

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron is among those on the right who have denounced New Labour for “accepting as a fact of life that eight million people who are economically inactive”, out of a total of thirty eight million people of working age.

The figure actually includes millions who are “economically active” for good reasons, including students, carers and some retired people. Yet Cameron was right to point out that there are large numbers of people without jobs who don’t show up in the official unemployment statistics. But again, he failed to identify the real culprit: the industrial collapse that was first unleashed by Thatcherism.

“If you go beyond the M4 corridor then labour market participation will be 80 percent”, says Larry Elliott. “If you go to parts of the old industrial heartlands it’s 55 percent, or 60 percent at most. So you’ve got far fewer people working in those areas, and the jobs they’re working in tend to be much more insecure, and less highly paid”.

Soon after David Cameron came to power in 2010, he started selling the idea that people were out of work due to their personal inadequacies.: a sentiment which is, of course, one of the pillars of the chav caricature.

The prime minister pledged to crackdown on welfare “fraud and error”, declaring that it cost the taxpayer £5.2 billion. But he had cunningly combined the cost of fraud committed by welfare recipients, just £1 billion a year, with that of errors on the part of officials - amounting to a far more considerable sum of £4.2 billion a year.

In doing so, he ensured that a much bigger headline figure associated with benefit fraud was lodged in the popular imagination. Of course, protesting that benefit fraud is exaggerated does not mean denying its occurrence. But it is often need, rather than dishonesty, that drives it.

For example, a compelling study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that many claimants taking undeclared cash-in-hand jobs did so to pay for food and heating, or pay back debt. “People in deprived areas are resorting to informal work because they are trying to support, feed and clothe their families”, said report author Aaron Barbour.

“They are hard-working, ordinary people trying to survive day by day”. Indeed, the report revealed widespread fear among unemployed private tenants that if they worked formally they would lose their housing benefit, plunging them yet further into poverty.

Above all, those interviewed expressed a strong desire to get formal paid work and leave benefits, or “go legit”, as soon as possible. Given the poverty levels at which many benefits are set, it’s hardly surprising that some “play the system”.

Jobseeker’s Allowance, for example, ranks among the lowest of any unemployment benefit in Western Europe. If, as in other European countries, it had been linked with earnings since 1979, people without work would receive £110 a week.

Because it is pegged to inflation, it is worth just £65.45 a week in 2010. For those unable to find secure employment, life on benefits is a constant struggle to stay afloat. Can we be surprised if a minority of claimants, particularly those with children, top up the meagre amount they receive from the state with a few hours of paid work on the side?

The “welfare scrounger” label is not just attached to those claiming benefits while taking on informal work. People claiming incapacity benefits have long been in the firing line of newspaper pundits and politicians of all major parties, who suspected that hundreds of thousands of people were skiving off despite being able-bodied.

The numbers of such incapacity benefit claimants explains, in large part, the disparity between the official unemployment statistics and the economic activity levels that Larry Elliott refers to. Looking at the figures, the critics appear to have a point. Go back to 1963 and there were less than half a million claiming incapacity benefit.

Yet by 2009 the figure was around 2.6 million, far higher than the number of people claiming Jobseeker’s allowance even in the midst of recession. It is self-evident that society has become considerably healthier in those forty-six years, thanks to advances in medical sciences and improvements in diet and lifestyle.

The number of men with long-standing illnesses that limit their capabilities has decreased significantly, from 17.4 percent to 15.5 percent. So how can we possibly explain the jump in incapacity benefit claimants?

The first point is that the number of claimants shot up during the Tory governments of 1979 to 1997. A particularly steep increase took place in the aftermath of the early 1990s recession, adding around 800,000 claimants by the time Prime Minister John Major was voted out of office.

It is now generally accepted that incapacity benefit was used to cloak the unemployment figures. Incapacity benefit recipients are indeed concentrated in the old, industrial areas of the North, Scotland and Wales. In areas of Southern England outside of the capital, on the other hand, the levels are much lower.

In a groundbreaking study based on hundreds of interviews, labour market experts Dr Christina Beatty and Professor Steve Fothergill put two contradictory explanations to the test: that claimants did have genuine health problems, and that the concentration of claimants in the old industrial area showed that the main underlying cause was a lack of work.

“The long economic recovery from the mid 1990s onward helped plug the gap, but never completely”, they argued. “In these circumstances there have never been quite enough jobs to go around. With a continuing imbalance in the local labour market, with the local demand for labour still running behind the potential local labour supply, it was therefore inevitable that some individuals would be squeezed out”.

To begin with, claimants were former industrial workers who had been thrown out of work, like the ex-miner I spoke to in Ashington. Many did have health problems because of their line of work, and could use them to claim incapacity benefits that paid more than unemployment benefits.

After all, the collapse of industry wiped out local jobs in these areas, and this was before low-paid service sector and public services jobs started to fill the vacuum to some degree. In the 1990s, between a third and a half of incapacity benefit claimants had been made redundant from their last job.

But, as time passed, some of these have found another job after a while, or they have passed on to the state pension. So who are today's incapacity benefit claimants? Beatty and Fothergill discovered that they were “typically the poorly qualified, low-skill manual worker in poor health, whose alternative would at best be unrewarding work or close to the national minimum wage”.

That means the type of person claiming incapacity benefit is different than it was even a decade ago, even though the headline figure has remained fairly constant. The researchers looked at the example of Barrow-in-Furness in North West England: a former shipbuilding town hit by industrial collapse.

Incapacity benefit claimants in the 1990s were largely laid-off skilled shipyard workers, but now they were low-skill, poorly qualified workers who had dropped out of their last job because of ill-health, and were “now disenchanted with the idea of ever returning to work”.

In an area with a “surplus of labour”, there was less of an incentive for employers to keep on staff with poor health by, for example, giving them lesser duties. Once they had been made redundant, workers with poor health were at a disadvantage because employers could always hire healthier people.

Overwhelmingly, people on incapacity benefit lack any qualifications whatsoever. We know that these sorts of workers, and if they are physically impaired in some way, there are even less. The researchers' conclusion was that “the UK's very high incapacity numbers are an issue of jobs and of health”.

Glasgow is a particularly striking example of how the de-industrialization of Britain has left continuing, but disguised, mass unemployment in its wake. The city houses more incapacity claimants than any other local authority.

The number of people claiming some form of disability benefits peaked in 1995 at one in five of the working population, or almost three times the UK level. A group of Glasgow University and Glasgow City Council experts looked at how the number of recipients increased during the 1980s, and concluded:

“The main reason for the huge growth in sickness benefit claims was the city's rapid de-industrialization”. The number of manufacturing jobs in 1991 had collapsed to just a third of the 1971 figure. Staggeringly, Glasgow rose from 208th to tenth place among local authorities for economic inactivity levels in the decade following 1981.

The situation improved in the noughties as the number of disability benefit claimants dropped from three times to double the national rate. The key finding was that this decline was, above all, down to a “strengthening of the labour market”.

No wonder the study dismissed government claims that: “The problem is not a lack of jobs”. The fact that a considerable number of incapacity benefit claimants are those without work in post-industrial Britain does not mean we should disregard the health issues involved.

As both New Labour and, following the 2010 general election, the conservative-led government began clamping down on claimants, the Citizens Advice Bureau exposed the scandal of clearly unwell people having their benefits taken away.

Over 20,000 benefit claimants got in touch with them after a new, stringent test found them “able to work”. Terminally ill patients, people with advanced forms of Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis, were registered as capable of returning to work.

One woman had her benefits cut after she missed an assessment appointment - because she was in hospital having chemotherapy for stomach cancer. Of course, there are people who play the system and falsely claim benefits. Right-wing tabloids relish hunting down the most outrageous examples of such fraud.

But this small minority is in no way representative of the majority of people out of work. The reality is that there are simply not enough jobs to go around. In late 2010, there were nearly 2.5 million people officially without work - and that doesn’t include the hundreds of thousands of people the government wants to drive off incapacity benefits.

Yet there are less than half a million vacancies in the entire country, according to the government’s own figures. That did not stop Iain Duncan Smith making an example out of Merthyr, a Welsh town particularly badly hit by deindustrialization and suffering from high levels of unemployment.

The local population had become “static”, he suggested, and they should get “on a bus” to Cardiff to look for work. His argument was torpedoed when it was revealed that there were nine jobseekers for every job in the Welsh capital.

From an employer’s perspective, stripping benefits from hundreds of people living in disguised unemployment would be profitable, to say the least. It would mean even more people competing for low-paid jobs, allowing employers to push down wages even further.

Unless the number of jobs miraculously increased at the same time, it would mean driving other workers out of employment. Business might prosper, but for benefit claimant and low-paid worker alike, benefits crackdowns risk forcing them into further poverty.

Above all, unemployment is a class issue. It is a fate you are far more likely to face if you are working class than if you are middle class. In May 2009 - about a year into the recession - the unemployment rate for people in professional occupations was just 1.3 percent, and was not much higher for managers and senior officials. But for skilled workers, it was 8.1 percent; for sales and customer service workers, it was 10.5 and for workers in unskilled, “elementary” occupations, it was 13.7 percent, or over ten times higher than for professionals.

Government cuts are inevitably going to drive hundreds of thousands more working-class people into the nightmare of unemployment. The old industrial areas were hammered by the recessions of the early 1980s and the early 1990s: it is they, again, who will suffer the most.

As the factories and mines closed, it was the public sector that, in large part, moved to fill the vacuum. As the Conservative-led government's ideological war on the state gathers pace, rising numbers of unemployed ex-public sector workers will inevitably push demand down, hitting the private sector too.

On top of that, significant swathes of the private sector depend on state contracts that are now being ripped up. At the end of 2010, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development estimated that the government's cuts programme would force 1.6 million people into unemployment - and most job losses would be in the private sector.

You don't need to be jobless to be poor in modern Britain. Poverty is generally defined as households with less than 60 percent of the nation's median income after housing costs are deducted. Less than five million people lived in poverty on the eve of the Thatcher counter-revolution, or less than one in ten of the population.

Today, poverty affects 13.5 million people, or more than one in five. If you are a single adult without children, that means living on less than £115 a week after housing costs are deducted. For a couple with two young children, it is less than £279 a week. There are only four European Union countries with higher rates of poverty.

Politicians and media commentators argue for work as the route out of poverty, but in low-pay Britain, having a job is no guarantee of living comfortably. The majority of people living in poverty actually have a job.

While there are three million families in which no one works living in poverty, there are another 3.5 million working families below the poverty line. Poverty affects huge numbers of people because, like unemployment, it is not a static figure: there is a broader group of people who move in and out of it over the course of their lifetimes.

When New Labour was in office, it introduced reforms that attempted to tackle the scandal of working poverty. But it did so within the framework of neoliberal economics - that is, allowing the market to run amok.

A leading union-backed Labour MP, John McDonnell, sums up the government's approach: "We will introduce tax credits, we will redistribute wealth, but we'll make sure what we'll do is force you into work where it's low paid, with the lowest minimum wage you could possibly think of."

In that way, you then become the guilty person if you can't afford to dig yourself out of poverty. There's a Victorian, patronizing attitude towards working people".

The minimum wage is a case in point. When it was introduced in 1999, it made a genuine difference to hundreds of thousands of low-paid workers. After all, it was perfectly legal, not so long ago, to pay a worker £1.50 an hour. But the rate was set at the lowest possible level.

In 2010, it was just £5.80 an hour if you were aged twenty-two or above. Even worse, it was discriminatory against the young. Workers aged between eighteen and twenty-one stuck on £4.83, up from £3.57 for the under-eighteens.

Clearly, these are not wages anyone could live on comfortably. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a salary of £14,400 is the minimum a single person needs for an acceptable standard of living.

If you work a thirty-five-hour week, that works out as £7.93 an hour, or over £2 an hour more than the minimum wage. Yet as the recession hit, the already low minimum wage was held back to below-inflation levels.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“Of course, it’s all about making work pay, even rotten work, low-paid work”, argues Clare Short, “but that was their instrument of redistribution, and it’s totally defective if you’re trying in the long term to build a more equal society, because it props up inequality”.

Inequality did not grow under New Labour as fast as it did under Thatcher: but the huge gap between rich and poor that had opened in the 1980s was not reduced. After thirteen years of New Labour government, Britain remained one of the most unequal societies in the Western world - and tax credits and the minimum wage did not change this.

Indeed, two-thirds of all the increase in income in the noughties went into the bank accounts of the top 10 percent of the population. One of the many snide accusations against the poor is that they ruin themselves by spending their money on frivolous and luxury items.

The reality could not be further from the truth. Chriss Tapp, debt expert and director of Credit Action, reveals that his organization rarely has to educate low-paid people when it comes to budgeting. “People at the bottom end of the income spectrum are better at managing their money day-to-day than people at the top end, because they absolutely need to be”, he explains.

“If you’ve got only a very limited amount of money coming in every week, and you’ve got to pay your bills, buy the food and feed the kids off that, then you have to be darn good at managing that”. Poorer people are much more concerned with spending wisely than wealthy ones are, he says.

We have seen how prejudices about poverty and unemployment converge in the image of the council estate. After all, not for nothing is it often suggested that “chav” is an acronym for “Council Housed And Violent”.

“Estates mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless petty stupidity, a kind of stir-craziness induced by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity. That is not to say that after three decades of social engineering, only one social type lives in council estates.

“I think it’s quite difficult to generalize about social tenants, or indeed council housing, because there is a big variety,” says housing charity Shelter’s Mark Thomas. “What you see in one area of the country is not the same as what you see in another area, and I think a lot of the media debate tends to be around quite crude stereotypes of council estates”

“Someone goes off and they find a photo of a council estate, normally it looks fairly grotty, and people conjure up a mental image in their minds. Actually, partly because of the right-to-buy, often a lot of what people might call “council estates” are quite mixed in terms of tenure, in any case.

In other words, what were once solid council estates may today include homeowners, private renters as well as council tenants. Thomas is keen to emphasize the different groups of people that can be found in council estates.

It is fashionable among Conservative politicians and right-wing commentators to talk of council housing promoting “dependency” among its tenants, but Thomas fiercely rejects this. “It’s sometimes suggested that social housing is somehow a cause of deprivation, it’s actually pushing people into poverty and reinforcing dependency.

We wouldn’t see it like that. We would see it as a vital safety net that actually provides people with an affordable, stable base from which they can actually go on and prosper, and build up other aspects of their life, without which it’s going to be very, very difficult for them to do so”.

The failure of recent governments to build affordable housing looks inexplicable to the point of madness. The number of houses built in 2010 was the lowest since 1922 - with the obvious exception of World War 2.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

Before Thatcher came to power, there were never fewer than 75,000 council dwellings built in any year; in 1999, the number was a disgracefully inadequate eighty-four. For the last thirty years, the dominant mantra has been that “the market knows best”, but the state’s retreat from meeting the nation’s housing needs in favour of market forces has shown how absurd this quasi-religious belief can be.

Aside from the millions who are spending years of their lives on waiting lists, the number of people in temporary accommodation soared by a stunning 135 percent between 2001 and 2008. And the government might not be spending much on social housing, but instead it spends £21 billion a year on housing benefit, much of which ends up subsidizing private landlords.

With the housing crisis worsening year by year, and with accommodation so central to people’s lives, why did a Labour government leave the whole policy to go to rot? Hazel Blears argues that local authorities did improve, but the fundamental distrust that New Labour had towards them meant they did everything to bypass them.

The union-backed Labour MP John McDonnell said: “Local authorities couldn’t ‘be trusted to wash the pots’ because for twenty years they were undermined in terms of the powers that they had and the resources that they had. So who in their right mind could become a councillor when all you were there for was rationing services and saying ‘no’ to everyone?”

He argues that Labour could have returned the powers to local government that Thatcher took away. If it was felt that the process would take too long, then the government could have channelled its energies into reinvigorating co-operative housing.

Blears suggests another reason: there simply was no one in government with enough interest in housing. “There wasn’t a big housing character”, she says. “Maybe our government needed a kind of housing person whose passion it was to do housing. I don’t think we did.”

Blears herself can measure the effects of New Labour’s neglect of housing in her own Salford constituency. “In terms of increasing stock and supply of affordable housing: yes, we should have done a lot, lot more, because it had really quite damaging social effects. I’ve got 16,000 on the waiting list”.

Just months after coming to power, David Cameron called for the scrapping of lifetime council tenancy agreements. Instead, only the most needy would be eligible for five year, or at most, ten year agreements.

If it was decided that their conditions had improved sufficiently, they could be turfed out of their homes and made to rent privately. Council estates would become nothing more than transit camps for the deprived. A government whose signature policy was building a “Big Society” was unveiling plans that would further undermine the cohesion of working class communities across the country.

As well as leading to social “cleansing” and unprecedented segregation, some policies will end up throwing people on to the streets. In the first Budget following the 2010 general election, the government announced plans to slash housing benefits.

They were right to complain that the amount spent on these benefits had rocketed over the years, but refrained from pointing out that this was because of the ever-growing crisis of affordable social housing. Cutting the level of rent eligible for housing benefits has the effect of reducing the number of properties poorer people can afford to live in, forcing them either to find somewhere cheaper or face homelessness.

Combined with plans to cap benefits to workless families at a maximum of £500 per week, low-income people face eviction from relatively richer areas, forcing them into effective ghettos. According to

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

estimates by London councils, as many as 82,000 households were at risk of losing their homes or being forced to move. This would be the biggest population movement in Britain since the second world war.

But it wasn't just the government's opponents who saw social cleansing at the heart of these plans. One unnamed Conservative minister compared the policy to the Highland Clearances - the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century evictions of small farmers from the Scottish Highlands - claiming that it would lead to an exodus of Labour voters from London.

Indeed Shaun Bailey, a former Conservative candidate who was defeated in Hammersmith at the 2010 general election, had argued that the Tories would struggle to win inner-city seats "because Labour had filled them with poor people".

Such was the outrage over the government's all-too-clear agenda that even London's mayor, the Conservative Boris Johnson, came out publicly to say that he would not accept "Kosovo-style social cleansing" of the capital.

Taken together, this is a toxic brew. Large numbers of people without secure work; low-paid work that fails to give people a comfortable existence; some of the highest levels of poverty in Western Europe; and millions left without affordable housing.

In some of the poorest working class communities in Britain, each of these crises is felt still more acutely. With all the misery, frustration and hopelessness that accompany them, is it any wonder if other social problems arise?

Imagine being a poor working-class youth in Britain today. Like on in three children, you will have grown up in poverty, lacking many of the things others take for granted: toys, days out, holidays, good food. You spent your childhood in a shabby, overcrowded house or flat, with little if any space to do your own thing.

Your parents, or parent may have done their best, but they have had to deal with the stress of lacking enough money to get by, either working in a monotonous low-paid job or having no job whatsoever. There are few, if any, decent local jobs for you to look forward to.

Indeed, one in four young people are "Neets" at some stage: that is, sixteen - to eighteen-year-olds, who are "not in education, employment or training". And of course, the disappearance of industrial apprenticeships has left few options for many young working-class men.

"It is well established that industrial restructuring has played a significant part in the restructuring of working class youth transitions to adulthood", says Professor Robert MacDonald. With so little hope for so many young people, how can anyone be surprised at the prevalence of anti-social behaviour in many deprived, working-class communities?

Of course this is a problem that can easily be exaggerated. "You hear, 'Oh, they'r all hoodies' - but they're not!" a retired Birmingham pattern-maker told me. "I used to hang around with a gang of lads. I used to wear a three-quarter-length coat. Winklepickers and jeans you could hardly get into. I was called a ruffian.

We survived! And I'm sure this generation will grow up and the next generation will have something different that people will be moaning about. No, I don't think they'r a bad lot really. You might get one or two, but then again you always did".

MacDonald agrees that it is "an age-old theme". As he sees it, "swathes of ordinary, working class young people get branded, corralled, herded, moved on, labelled as 'trouble' simply for passing their evening leisure time in unremarkable, untroublesome friendship groups on the streets.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

This street-corner society was the dominant form of leisure for ordinary working class young men in our studies. Wasn't it ever thus? Was for me!"

And yet the approach of politicians and the media has been to encourage fear and loathing of working-class youth, making no attempt to understand the root causes of anti-social behaviour where it occurs. Of course, that does not stop the bad behaviour of a small minority being a nuisance for other members of the community.

But, as Ashington showed, all too often it can be a cry of despair: of anguish at the lack of a future, and a feeling that there is nothing to lose. Boredom is another factor. Unfettered free markets have been allowed to dismantle our local communities, bit by bit.

Places where young people could congregate have been disappearing. According to the government's Valuation Office Agency, the number of sports and social clubs fell by 55 percent in the thirteen years of New Labour rule.

Post offices were down by 39 percent; swimming pools by 21 percent; pubs by 7 percent; and public libraries by 6 percent. The sorts of things that have flourished in their place hardly foster a sense of community, or give young people something to do.

Betting shops and casinos went up by 39 percent and 27 percent respectively, for example. Little wonder young people have been forced to create their own entertainment - or that a minority have resorted to anti-social behaviour out of boredom, despair, or both.

Nothing sums up the blight of anti-social behaviour in the minds of many than teenage gangs wearing hoodies and loitering menacingly on street corners. But, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found, gangs can be about teenagers grouping together for protection, looking out for each other, and even avoiding trouble.

Looking at gang culture in six areas, researchers discovered a strong link between territorial behaviour and poorer communities. Getting involved with a gang provided some young people with fun, excitement and support they otherwise lacked.

Furthermore, the charity revealed "connections between poor housing conditions and often difficult family backgrounds, and territoriality. Territorial behaviour appeared for some to be a product of deprivation, a lack of opportunities and attractive activities, limited aspirations and an expression of identity."

Additionally, gangs "could be understood as a coping mechanism for young people living in poverty". It is common to hear right-wing commentators and politicians blame bad parenting for anti-social behaviour among working-class youth.

Simon Heffer, one of the country's leading right-wing columnists, put it to me that we need to be "punishing bad parenting. I mean, you've got cases of children growing up engaging in criminality who are below the age of criminal responsibility. Lock up the parents! Put the children into care, and have them make sure the children are properly brought up and educated in care".

Contrary to this view, successive reports by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have found that in reality, parents often play a hugely positive role in tough working-class areas. "There is a widespread view that anti-social behaviour by young people can simply be blamed on bad parenting", observed Peter Seaman, the co-author of one report.

"Yet the parents we interviewed described sophisticated strategies to minimize their children's exposure to danger and to guard them against temptations to go off the rails".

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Gangs can provide a form of the solidarity that has leaked out of increasingly fragmented working-class communities. To soaring numbers of young people with bleak prospects, gangs can give life meaning, structure and reward.

No wonder they have appealed to some working-class children who have grown up in poverty and have a lack of faith in their future. Indeed, as one investigation put it, they provide an opportunity for “career advancement” through risk-taking and criminal activity - very often the only kind of success young people believe is available to them.

Because of “the current heavy emphasis in schools on academic success”, some young people looked “elsewhere for validation”. Yet the New Labour era saw a crackdown on the symptoms, rather than the causes, of anti-social behaviour.

The former government’s approach served to magnify the problem in people’s minds and criminalized the young people responsible, without helping in any way to turn their lives around. And to our shame, there are more young people behind bars in England and Wales than anywhere else in Western Europe.

The numbers of young people aged between ten and seventeen with a custodial sentence trebled between 1991 and 2006. But prison most certainly does not rehabilitate: some three-quarters of young people re-offend after release.

New Labour’s approach to crime was authoritarian, disregarding the main root cause: poverty. Before he became Labour Leader, the rising star that was Tony Blair won plaudits by committing to a policy of “tough on crime, touch on the causes of crime”.

But as Blair’s political secretary John McTernan has admitted, New Labour’s strategy ended up as “tough on crime, tough on criminals”. Between 1993 and 2010, England and Wales’s prison population nearly doubled, from 44,500 to around 85,000.

What is startling about these figures is that the prison population was spiralling out of control even as crime itself was falling. During the 2010 general election, the Tories put allegedly soaring crime rates at the forefront of their “Broken Britain” narrative.

Their figures were a myth. According to the British Crime Survey, crime fell from 18.5 million offences in 1993 to 10.7 million by 2009. This success was not achieved because more people were thrown into prison, as many New Labour politicians would have us believe.

Indeed, a secret government memo leaked when Labour was in power in 2006 suggested that “80 percent of the recent decrease in crime is due to economic factors”. Or consider a 2005 study by the Crime and Society Foundation which argued that escalating murder rates in the 1980s were the legacy of recession and mass unemployment.

Indeed, as the economic boom that began in the early 1990s took off, crime rates fell right across the Western world. Even the conservative-led coalition that took power after the 2010 general election accepted a link between crime and underlying economic factors.

People have got more scared of crime even as the actual levels have gone down, but this has everything to do with sensationalist journalism and inflammatory rhetoric on the part of politicians. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that your risk of becoming a victim of crime depends a great deal on your class.

The British Crime Survey shows that working-class people are significantly more likely to suffer from crime than middle-class people. Working class people are often reproached for being authoritarian when it comes to law-and-order issues - but of course you are more likely to worry if the risk of crime looms larger in your community.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

There is little doubt that at the root of much crime in Britain is the illegal drugs industry. When many people think of council estates, they imagine a dirty stairwell littered with hypodermic needles. The truth is that people of all classes have experimented with drugs at some stage in their lives.

Millions of teenagers, working and middle class, have smoked a joint; and a very considerable percentage of young people have swallowed an ecstasy tablet on a night out. “Looking at the available evidence, in terms of teenagers and young people, there is not an obvious link amongst that group between socio-economic status and levels of drug and alcohol misuse”, says Martin Barnes, chief executive of the drugs charity DrugScope.

Indeed, cocaine has a long-established reputation as the middle-class drug of choice. A House of Commons Select Committee report recently denounced the fact that “it seems to have become more socially acceptable and seen as a “safe”, middle class drug.

But when it comes to problematic drug use, the differences are striking. “The government Advisory Panel on the Misuse of Drugs published a report a couple of years ago, and it concluded that when you look at levels of drug misues with older age groups, there was a very clear link with areas of deprivation and unemployment”, says Martin Barnes.

This was particularly striking when you looked at working-class communities devastated by economic crisis. “The experience in some communities in the 1990s was that in those areas that were quite hard hit by unemployment, particularly young people’s unemployment, we did see levels of drug misuse increase, not just heroin”.

Barnes is careful to say that, of course, other factors come into play, not least the rise of rampant consumerism in the 1980s and the greater availability of drugs. But he was in no doubt that people often made the leap from being a bit experimental with drugs to full-blown, probelmatic drug use, either through despair or as a coping mechanism.

You can see why drugs have strengthened their grip over some of the communities that never recovered from the battering they got under Thatcherism. The tragedy of hard drugs is most visible in Britain’s crippled mining villages. “I honestly think that there wouldn’t have been half the drug addicts and stuff like that if the mines hadn’t closed”, former Nottinghamshire miner Adrian Gilfoyle told me.

A few years ago, Labour MP John Mann launched an inquiry into heroin use in the former mining community of Bassetlaw. It concluded that a health crisis comparable to a smallpox epidemic was raging in the heart of some of Britain’s former coalfields.

“People growing up in the coalfields lack the sense of identity afforded to their parents and grandparents who were part of a stable and prosperous mining industry”, the report said. “The strongest substance used in these communities was beer, and stable employment allowed most a good standard of living”.

With the collapse of the mining industry, “there is a need to escape”, and heroin in thes areas was associated with a need to “get away from it all”. “Mining villages are Trainspotting without the glamour”, was its dismal conclusion.

Modern Conservatives blame many of these social problems on the exccessive growth of the state. But they also favour another explanation: the breakdown of the traditional family. Single-parent families in particular have found themselves in the firing line.

The working-class single mum is, after all, one of the most reviled “chav” icons. Fiona Weir, of single parents’ charity Gingerbread, enumerates some of the notions associated with the people she represents: “scroungers”, “spongers”, “lazy”, “doesn’t want to work”, “happy on benefits”. “It’s very persuasive and it’s very directly related to a lot of the welfare reform debates that are playing out”. Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

Despite the difficulties involved, most single parents want to work. According to the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey, 84 percent of unemployed single parents want to either get a job or to study. But single parents face attack whatever they do.

“We get a phrase used a lot by single parents, which is ‘damned if I do, damned if I don’t’”, says Weir. “Because if you’re on benefits you’re somehow seen as a lazy scrounger, but if you go out to work, you’re somehow seen as neglecting your kids and not knowing where they are while they run around wild”.

It is not shiftlessness keeping many single parents from working, but a number of barriers that are difficult to overcome: like having a job compatible with single-handedly raising a kid, and affordable, accessible childcare.

As Weir argues, stigmatizing single parents undermines their self-confidence and does nothing to help them get a job. The Tories often argue that family structure is one of the major deciding factors in whether a child does well at school and in later life.

They are on a factual collision course with a recent study by the Children’s society, which showed that conflict in the family has ten times more of an impact on a child’s upbringing. “The evidence base shows that most children from single parent families turnout fine”, says Fiona Weir.

“There are poorer outcomes for a significant minority, but when you analyse them, they correlate very, very clearly with things like poverty and conflict. And you get similarly poor outcomes in children from couple families that have similar levels of poverty and conflict”.

When people think of single mothers, it is often teenage girls that spring to mind. But in reality, only one in fifty single mothers is under eighteen. The average age for a single parent is thirty-six, and over half had the children while married.

Even so, there is no denying that Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Western Europe. It is also impossible to deny the class dimension of this issue. Although the numbers overall are low, teenagers from manual backgrounds are eight times more likely to become mothers than those from a professional background.

The regions that top the teenage pregnancy tables are those areas where industry was destroyed and low-paid service sector jobs have filled in the vacuum. Why? If doctor-turned-author Max Pemberton, writing in the Daily Telegraph, is to be believed, it is because for “children from working class families, where aspiration is considered middle class, choices in life consist of becoming a celebrity, working in a shop or becoming a mum.

The holy grail is ready access to a council flat and state benefits, which is precisely what having a baby gives you”. As Fiona Weir points out, this unpleasant populist caricature of the crafty, benefit-seeking teenage mum is a myth.

“We come into contact with thousands of single parents but somehow we just don’t meet ones who fit this stereotype. How are we managing to avoid them. I don’t know. As for sixteen and seventeen year olds, they can’t get the keys to a council house at that age.

They either live at home or they go into supported accommodation”. Middle class teenagers are certainly less likely to fall pregnant in the first place, but they are also significantly more likely to have an abortion.

Their reason for not wanting a child was the same: fear of the impact it would have on their career at such an early stage. But if you live in an area of high unemployment and with only unappealing, low-paid jobs on offer, why wait for motherhood?

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“In some cases there will be an element of people who don’t see a lot of routes for themselves in terms of what they can do with their life”, says Fiona Weir. “They might be looking for a sense of role, and purpose, and meaning, and wanting to be useful and to matter”.

One recent, detailed study showed that teenage pregnancy can bring with it many positives, particularly for young people from poorer backgrounds. “Our research makes it clear that young parenthood can make sense and be valued and even provide an impetus for teenage mothers and fathers to strive to provide a better life for their children”, said Dr Claire Alexander, one of the report’s authors.

Indeed, having a child can actually be empowering. As another study put it: “Particularly amongst those who come from disadvantaged groups, for whom there may be little perceived reward for delaying parenthood, early motherhood can provide the opportunity to attain self-respect and adult status”.

We have seen that some of the things people associate with “chavs” have a basis in reality. There are some alienated, angry young people out there who take out some of their frustration in anti-social ways. Things like crime and drug addiction are more common in working class areas than in the average middle-class suburb.

A working-class teenager is considerably more likely to give birth than her middle-class peer. But the reality is rather different from the vicious generalizations and victim-blaming that accompanies chav-hate.

Poverty, unemployment and a housing crisis provide fertile ground for a range of social problems. These are working class communities that took the brunt of a class war first unleashed by Thatcher three decades ago. Indeed it would be more startling if life had gone on, much like before, even as the pillars of the community collapsed one by one.

Proclaiming that people are responsible for their situation makes it easier to oppose the social reforms that would otherwise be necessary to help them. But such demonization does not stand up to scrutiny. People born into poor, working class communities do not deserve their fate, nor have they contributed to it.

As the industries that sustained their lives disappeared, the once-tight bonds holding many working class communities together unravelled at a breathtaking pace. Those living there could once look forward to respected, relatively well-paid jobs. Their lives had structure.

Today, large swathes of communities are haunted by despair, frustration and boredom. Without real economic recovery, the social diseases that accompany hopelessness have flourished. It would be wrong to lay all the blame at the feet of the Tories.

After all, New Labour left manufacturing to wilt, too. At the end of their rule, they toyed with the beginnings of an industrial strategy to encourage a revival, but it was too little, and for them, far too late.

Britain did not suffer the same level of unemployment as in the 1980s and 1990s, even as the economy went into free fall following the 2008 financial crash. But all too often it was part-time and low-paid service sector jobs that filled the vacuum, and they could not resuscitate the communities worst hit by the Thatcherite experiment in the 1980s.

This is why many of New Labour’s policies amounted to sticking plasters in communities ravaged by the Tories under their eighteen year rule - plasters that are now being torn off, the wounds still bleeding underneath.

It is not surprising that so many working class people felt alienated from Labour. They felt it was no longer fighting on their side. Some succumbed to apathy - but not all. Deprived of a narrative to explain what was happening to their lives, some began to grope for other logics.

It was not the wealthy victors of Thatcher's class war who found themselves on the sharp end. The frustrations and anger of millions of working-class people were channelled into a backlash against immigrants.

Backlash

"Labour's treacherous lies and cardinal betrayal of the working classes is obvious to all. But the really good news is that the radical left have all but vanished from defending the working classes. - Johnathan Bowden, BNP activist.

The long, freezing winter of 2010 had finally drawn to a close and it was one of the first sunny Sundays in months. Families were taking advantage of the warm weather, and houses with anyone inside were few and far between.

After fruitlessly knocking on a few doors, a middle-aged woman wearing an apron finally answered. It was obvious she wanted to speak her mind. "My son can't get a job", she said angrily. "But there are all these immigrants coming in and they're getting all the jobs. There are too many immigrants!"

It would be easy to dismiss someone with these views as a knuckle-dragging racist. But it was clear that she was not. That spring, activists of all political stripes found the immigration issue cropping up again and again.

It had not come out of nowhere. Throughout the 2000s, a growing backlash against immigration had developed. Polls reflected an increasing hostility to more people entering the country. At the 2005 election, the Tories tried to tap into this groundswell with their infamous "It's not racist to impose limits on immigration" posters.

But nothing focused people's minds on immigration more than the rise of the British National Party. In the early days of New Labour, back in 1999, the B N P had won just over a hundred thousand votes in the European elections, a decade later, they would poll not far short of a million.

Far-right extremists celebrated jubilantly as B N P leader Nick Griffin and his Nazi-sympathising colleague Andrew Brons became Members of the European Parliament. The rising B N P tide spilled over into national elections, too.

At the 1997 general election, it polled a paltry 35,832 votes, only a handful more than the eccentric National Law party. Sixteen other parties did better. Eight years later, over 192,000 voted for B N P candidates, making the party the eighth largest in the country.

There was huge relief following the 2010 general election that the B N P did not manage to pick up any seats. Yet it had still attracted nearly 564,000 votes. The B N P was now the fifth largest party in Britain. Is the B N P's rise a sign that society is becoming more racist?

The short answer is "no". Back in 1958, a Gallup poll found that 71 percent of Britons opposed interracial marriage - and yet there was no racist party even fielding candidates. So few people subscribe to such a view these days that pollsters do not bother recording the figures.

Today, Britain has the highest levels of mixed-race marriages in Europe, and only 3 percent admit to being "very racially prejudiced". Four out of five people claim to have no prejudice whatsoever. The irony is that Britain has become less racist at the same time as it is faced with the most electorally successful racist party in British history.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

To understand why people vote for the B N P, it is important to understand what the B N P is. Opinion polls are a bit unreliable because, outside the anonymity of the polling booth, some potential voters are wary of admitting their support for the B N P.

But they clearly show that the average B N P voter is likely to be working class: for example, one You Gov poll found that 61 percent of B N P supporters were in the bottom three social classifications. The B N P has thrived in traditionally white working-class areas with a long history of returning Labour candidates.

Little wonder that the rise of the B N P has reinforced one of the popular “chav” caricatures of the white working class: beer-bellied skinhead on a council estate, moaning about hordes of immigrants “coming in and taking our jobs”.

Indeed, it has suited many politicians and journalists to portray the B N P’s rise as a matter of white working-class people trying to preserve their identity from a non-white invasion. Frank Field, a right-wing, anti-immigration Labour MP, told me that the B N P are appealing to “a sense that people are losing their country without ever being asked whether that’s what they want”.

But it is not simply racism that has driven hundreds of thousands of working class people into the waiting arms of the B N P. The rise of the far-right is a reaction to the marginalization of working-class people. It is a product of politicians’ refusal to address working-class concerns, particularly affordable housing and a supply of decent, secure jobs.

It has been fuelled by a popular perception that Labour had abandoned the people it was created to represent. Karl Marx once described religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature”: something similar could be said about the rise of the far right today.

The B N P is often compared to the European fascist parties of the 1930s. Yet, in reality, it has flourished for completely different reasons. The fascism of the Great Depression era largely owed its support to small property-owners and big businesses who felt threatened by a growing left, whereas today’s B N P is a product of the left’s weakness.

With no powerful left to answer the bread-and-butter concerns of working class people in the neoliberal era of job insecurity and housing crisis, the B N P has filled the vacuum. There was once a popular narrative that social problems were caused by the injustices of capitalism that, at the very least, had to be corrected.

With these ideas forced out of the mainstream, it has been easy for the idea that all social problems are caused by outsiders, immigrants, to gain a foothold. It is a myth that, fanned by right-wing newspapers and journalists, has resonated in working class communities across Britain.

That is not to completely dismiss ethnic identity as a factor. The B N P does well in certain overwhelmingly white areas that have seen a recent influx of new, ethnic minority residents. Hackney is one of the most mixed areas in the country, and as a result the far right has died out there.

But it flourishes in areas such as Barking and Dagenham, where mass immigration is a new phenomenon and where the B N P has done well; or conversely, where there is little immigration but tremendous fear of it.

The demonization of the working class has also had a real role to play in the B N P’s success story. Although ruling elites have made it clear that there is nothing of worth in working-class culture, we have been urged to celebrate the identities of minority groups.

What’s more, liberal multiculturalism has understood inequality purely through the prism of race, disregarding that of class. Taken together, this has encouraged white working class people to develop Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

similar notions of ethnic pride, and to build an identity based on race so as to gain acceptance in multicultural society.

The B N P has made the most of this disastrous redefinition of white working class people as, effectively, another marginalized ethnic minority. “Treating the white working class as a new ethnic group only does the B N P a massive favour”, says anthropologist Dr Gillian Evans, “and so does not talking about a multiracial working class”.

It is unlikely the B N P will ever gain significant power, not least because of chronic incompetence and infighting, of the kind that crippled the party after the 2010 general election. But its rise is like a warning shot.

Unless the working-class people are properly represented once again and their concerns taken seriously, Britain faces the prospect of an angry new right-wing populism. Barking and Dagenham first appeared on the national political radar in 2006, when the B N P stormed onto the local council with an apparent avalanche of support.

With eleven seats in the bag, it was now the main opposition to Labour. It had only stood candidates in thirteen out of the fifty-one seats up for grabs. This was a political earthquake whose tremors were felt across the country.

Why was a once solidly Labour area defecting to what was until recently a fringe racist party? Margaret Own, a retired home carer said: “Well, it’s all these foreigners coming in. Our borough is just changing. It used to be so nice”.

It did not take long to understand the real reason for her dislike. “They’re getting the houses, and our people, our children can’t get the houses. Foreigners come in here and get places. My children never got it. It’s just gong down the pan. If I can get out of Dagenham, I will”.

Many local residents harbour similar frustrations. Danny, a lanky, thoughtful man in his late thirties, has lived in the area since he was eight years old. A printer by trade until the industry went bust, he found work in a warehouse in nearby Romford and then in a furniture shop.

Legislation introduced by New Labour compelled him to work for his dole money, and he was told that he would either have to work for a company for nothing, or go into voluntary service. He ended up volunteering in a local charity shop, “because if I work for a company, I’m earning them money, when all I’m getting is my basic giro, which is below the minimum wage”.

Like Margaret Own, Danny insisted that housing was the main local grievance. “There’s 10,000 people on the housing list who are trying to get a house”, he said. Danny was wary about discussing the B N P’s local rise. It was he said, a “dodgy subject” because he feared being labelled a racist.

A friend of his is bringing up a child on her own and has been shunted around temporary accommodation for years. But while there is not enough affordable housing to meet the need, a large prison is being built: a source of real exasperation among the locals.

“Why don’t they build houses over there instead of building a prison?” Unsurprisingly, the issue of jobs weighs heavily on Danny’s mind. At its height, the Ford factory employed 40,000 people and was at the heart of the community. Sam Tarry, a leading local anti-racist campaigner who has lived in East London all his life, points out that “part of Dagenham was actually built to house the workers from that particular factory”.

Danny paints a picture of insecure, low-paid work for many local people in the post-Ford era. Danny is not short of frustrations, but he has no faith in the ability of traditional political parties to alleviate them.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

I did not actually meet anyone willing to admit voting for the B N P, and Danny says that he does not vote. But he eloquently describes some of the ingredients that, taken together, have made a toxic brew: massive housing shortages, a lack of secure jobs, and a convenient scapegoat, plus total disillusionment with the political establishment added in for good measure.

There was, undoubtedly, a steep rise in the number of foreign immigrants moving to Dagenham during the New Labour era. This has clearly been a disorienting experience for some who have lived there all their lives.

“Empirically, it’s the fastest-changing borough in Britain”, says local Labour MP Jon Cruddas, who has represented Dagenham since 2001. But what has turned disorientation into outright resentment and hostility is what is on ever residents lips: housing.

“It’s the lowest-cost housing market in Greater London, at a time of exponential rise in the value of property, and at the same time, the effect of right-to-buy means that we have more of a private market”, says Cruddas.

“So you’ve seen the housing market in one small borough disproportionately take the strain in terms of broader patterns of migration into and within the borough”. Looming over the whole borough is the shadow of right-to-buy, which massively depleted the borough’s council-housing stock.

“You’ve got many people here who took the opportunity to buy their home under the right-to-buy schemes in the eighties and nineties”, says Sam Tarry. “Many of them have now reached a point where they’ve got grown-up children who are either having to live at home, or having to move quite far out of the area to get a house, even just to rent a house, let alone to buy one”.

Many of the houses bought up by their owners ended up in the hands of private landlords. Sam identifies insecure employment as an issue further feeding the frustrations of local people. “The difficulty is that actually the generation of people in their late thirties, forties, fifties, is a generation of people who I think weren’t employed by the Ford factory, they didn’t have a skilled trade, and left school certainly with no further education qualifications, and very little, secondary-level qualifications”, he says.

Cruddas blames the “extraordinary de-industrialization” that has taken place. “This was the centre of manufacturing in London, with its associated predictabilities in terms of pensions and employment. And it’s no surprise that the B N P move in”.

In Barking and Dagenham, the B N P has cleverly managed to latch on to the consequences of unfettered neoliberalism. New Labour was ideologically opposed to building council housing, because of its commitment to building a “property-owning democracy” and its distrust of local authorities.

Affordable housing and secure, well-paid jobs became increasingly scarce resources. The response of the B N P was to delegitimize non-native competition, goading people to think: “We don’t have enough houses to go around, so why are we giving them to foreigners.”

Cruddas describes the B N P as hinging their strategy on “change versus enduring inequalities, and they realiste it”. All issues, whether housing or jobs, are approached in terms of race. “It allows people to render intelligible the changes around them, in terms of their own insecurities, material insecurities as well as cultural ones”.

Yest, it is a narriative based on myths. After all, only one in twenty social houses goes to a foreign national. But, with the government refusing to build homes and large numbers of foreign-looking people arriving in certain communities, the B N P’s narrative just seems to make sense to a lot of people.

The B N P's strategy has been obligingly boosted by the right-wing tabloids. "£5 million benefits for disable migrants who flew home", screams one Daily Express headline. "Secret report warns of migration meltdown in Britain", warns the Daily Mail.

"Illegal immigrant mum gets four-bedroom house", gasps the Sun. If you are a working-class person struggling to scrape by, who cannot get an affordable home or at least knows others in that position, then being bombarded with these stories gives credence to the B N P narrative: that there aren't enough resources to go round, and immigrants are getting the lion's share of them.

Coupled with this strategy is an audacious attempt by the B N P to encroach on Labour's terrain. With New Labour having apparently abdicated the party's traditional role of shielding working class communities from the worst excesses of market forces, the B N P has wrapped itself in Labour clothes.

"I would say that we're more Labour than Labour are", says former local B N P councillor Richard Barnbrook. B N P literature describes the organization as "the Labour party your grandfather would have voted for".

Sifting through the B N P's policies exposes this as a nonsense. Their tax policy, for example, includes abolishing income tax and increasing VAT instead - a policy beloved of extreme right-wing libertarian economists that would benefit the rich at the expense of ordinary working people.

The party freely adopts Thatcherite rhetoric, committing itself to the "private-enterprise economy" and arguing "that private property should be encouraged and spread to a many individual members of our nation as possible".

And yet, in communities such as Barking and Dagenham, the B N P has cleverly managed to package itself as the champion of the white working class. As well as counterposing the interests of white working class people to those of ethnic minorities, the B N P has won support by throwing itself into community politics.

Party activists help to clear rubbish, help out in pensioner's gardens - things that give the impression that they are rooted in the local community. "You see lots of old people saying 'the B N P has put on a bingo night', and it's really classic community politics that masks what they're really about", says trade union leader Mark Serwotka.

Disturbingly, it is not just former Labour voters that the B N P has managed to attract. "One interesting factor, which we certainly saw in the 2006 elections, when the B N P got their eleven councillors elected, was the fact it wasn't just disenfranchised Labour voters", says Sam Tarry.

"They actually turned out great numbers who'd never voted at all before, so-called virgin voters. To actually motivate people who would usually just not bother with the political system, to actually go and take their first political step and doing it hand-in-hand with the B N P is an extremely worrying sign".

The far-right has managed to mobilize people who have never voted before because they feel that the traditional political parties simply do not represent their interests. It is clear that the B N P has thrived by offering reactionary, hateful solutions to the everyday problems of working-class people.

But the demonization of working-class Britain has also played a role. For Tarry, it has fuelled a crisis of identity that accelerated the growth of the B N P and the wider anti-immigrant backlash. As well as recent national soul-searching about what constitutes Englishness and Britishness, the question raised in communities like Barking and Dagenham is: "What does it mean to be working class?"

We've seen a switch into a sort of English nationalism, and you'll see a lot of the white families deliberately hanging out the English flag from their windows, almost as though they're estaking out the territory, in a slightly aggressive, non-inclusive way", says Tarry.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Pride in being working class has been ground down over the past three decades. Being working class has become increasingly regarded as an identity to leave behind. The old community bonds that came from industry and social housing have been broken.

But working class identity was something that used to be central to the lives of people living in communities like Barking and Dagenham. It gave a sense of belonging and of self-worth, as well as a feeling of solidarity with other local people.

When this pride was stripped away, it left a vacuum that the waking beast of English nationalism has partly filled. In a similar way, we have seen Scottish and Welsh nationalism gain new roots in the hitherto Labour-voting estates of Glasgow and the Rhondda Valley.

But there is a key difference: Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party shun ethnic based nationalism in favour of a progressive-leaning, inclusive nationalism. Indeed, Plaid Cymru boasts of having more ethnic minority councillors than the other Welsh parties put together, while the first Asian elected to the Scottish Parliament was a member of the Scottish Nationalist Party.

Central to the jingoist streak in English nationalism is the long, sordid history of Empire. "It's not that long ago, when you had the map with all the red blocks of where the British Empire ruled", trade union leader Billy Hayes notes.

The centuries-old traditions of domination over other peoples have left a very large imprint in the national psyche, which the B N P constantly manipulates. The far right have switched their targets of choice over the years: Jews, Irish, Blacks and Asians were each the villains at various points.

Today, above all others, it is Muslims. An ugly wave of Islamophobia has accompanied the so-called war on terror that was launched following the 9/11 attacks. British soldiers are at war with Muslim peoples in Muslim lands. Aided by hysterical media baiting of Muslims, the B N P has made Islamophobia into the very core of its propaganda.

More perversely, the B N P has cynically manipulated mainstream multiculturalism with its focus on inequality as an issue of race. B N P propaganda has tapped into this by recasting white working-class people as an oppressed ethnic minority, allowing it to appropriate anti-racist language.

B N P leaflets are full of bogus talk of the "white minority" and "anti-white racism". When the party was taken to court for its whites only constitution, it retorted by asking why it should be any different from other ethnic minority organizations, like the National Black Police Association.

Of course, this represents a distortion of mainstream multiculturalism. Irrespective of its flaws, multiculturalism is essentially about defending the rights of ethnic groups, who make up only one in ten of the population in our overwhelmingly white society.

But this is one of the consequences of eliminating class from our understanding of inequality - because a group like the B N P can simply argue that it is defending the rights of whites in a multicultural society, just as other might defend the rights of Muslims or black people.

It would be simplistic to maintain that the waves of immigration that took place under New Labour have had no impact in and of themselves. By historical standards immigration has been high, and this alone would have provoked anxiety or hostility among some people.

If you have always lived in a homogeneously white area, with little or no experience, or contact with, different cultures, then a sudden change in your community may, to begin with, be a cause of confusion or alarm.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Even though history has shown this tension dissipates within a generation or so when genuine mixing has taken place, there may inevitably be tensions in communities undergoing transition. But economic insecurities have lent added ferocity to the backlash against immigration - and it is this that the B N P has so successfully manipulated.

“The wider issue is that there weren’t jobs created for working-class people and there weren’t homes for their children to live in”, says Ken Livingstone. “And it’s easy for the B N P to say, well, the blacks are getting it all. In reality no one was getting any, because they weren’t building any or making any”.

It would be wrong to caricature communities like Barking and Dagenham as stuffed with angry white working class people frothing at the mouth about immigrants. There are many who are disgusted with the B N P and have gone out of their way to welcome immigrants hailing from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Indian subcontinent.

When I asked Leslie, a home carer, and her friend Mora, a pensioner, what the main issues in the community were, they came up with the usual answer: “That same old thing - housing”. But that did not mean they had automatically rushed into the B N P camp.

“They’re bad. They’re trouble. Very bad”, they both say. “I mean, I’m quite happy in Barking and Dagenham”, Leslie says, and Mora agrees: “We were born here. And I would never move out of Dagenham”.

They are both deeply scornful of “the crap that the B N P are coming out with. At the moment they’re frightening people, they’re saying old people can get chucked out of their house, and it’s given to the “illegals”. If they can say where the illegals are, fine. But there are no illegal immigrants in this borough. I mean there’s good and bad in everybody, but the B N P are very bad”.

“They’re very racist, aren’t they” asks Leslie, drawing a quick response from Mora: “Very, very racist they are”. Although neither had faith in politicians at the national level, they did trust their local Labour councillors. But their impression of the B N P was of total incompetence.

“They’ve done nothing. You try and get hold of them, you can’t get hold of them. And yet they have the cheek to stand and say that Labour’s doing nothing. You can get in touch with the Labour Party, they do listen to you, they sort out your problems, but the B N P - no”.

Both are insistent that they mix with people of all backgrounds in their community. Leslie works with black managers and carers, for example. “We’ve got an Indian family across the road from us”, adds Mora. “Every now and then they bring over a meal. Very, very nice.”

These are the sorts of sentiments that anti-racist campaigners built on the run-up to the 2010 general and local elections. The “hope not hate” campaign built a formidable network of campaigners, developed literature targeted at particular groups in specific localities and exposed the incompetence of B N P councillors.

Community organizing was the backbone of the campaign, and trade unions played a central role in funding the effort and spreading the word among local working-class people. The campaign paid off beyond the wildest expectations of anti-racist activists.

The fear was that the B N P would pick up at least one MP in the two local constituencies; the nightmare scenario was that it would take control of the council. In the event the B N P was completely wiped out, losing all twelve of their councillors.

Labour may have faced a disastrous rout at the polls in the general election, but the local Labour Party took every single seat on Barking and Dagenham council. B N P leader Nick Griffin responded by throwing his toys out of the pram, claiming that the “English” had been driven out of London.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Yet there are no grounds for complacency. The B N P was defeated above all by vastly increased voter turnout, itself the product of an extremely effective campaign. In the Barking parliamentary constituency, the B N P vote went from 4,916 votes in 2005 to 6,620 in 2010; but at the same time the overall turnout dramatically increased from 28,906 to 44,343, meaning the B N P vote share dropped.

B N P council candidates did lose votes, but only around one hundred votes in each ward: indeed, many candidates topped 1,000 votes. Even before the impact of the most sweeping public sector cuts in modern history had been felt, the B N P had retained a solid base within Barking and Dagenham.

The reality is that the grievances that spurred on the B N P upsurge are greater than ever. There is still a critical lack of affordable housing, and well-paid, secure jobs remain thin on the ground. Working-class people in Barking and Dagenham, as elsewhere in the country, will continue to demand answers.

The future of our communities depends on who gives them. The rise of the B N P is just the tip of the iceberg of the great anti-immigrant backlash of the early twenty-first century. There is no avoiding the difficult truth that the vast majority of Britons believe immigration levels are too high.

Take one poll for the Sun in October 2007; nearly two-thirds of the population wanted immigration laws toughened. But, while only 6 percent of people in the top three social categories wanted immigration stopped altogether, three times as many in the bottom third wanted the borders completely sealed.

These sentiments are not confined to areas that have experienced large influxes from abroad like Barking and Dagenham. Across the country, anti-immigration has become the rallying cry of people who would never dream of voting for the B N P.

It was the sort of thing we were told belonged to the 1970s. In defiance of some of the most stringent anti-union laws in the Western world, workers at the Lindsey oil refinery downed tools in a spontaneous walkout at the end of January 2009.

Media commentators were dumbfounded as sympathy strikes spread to towns such as Grangemouth, Sellafield, Wilton, Staythorpe and Didcot, among others. This was not supposed to happen in twenty-first century Britain.

But there was a twist to this apparent renewed union militancy. The media spin was that these were semi-racist, anti-immigrant strikes in protest at foreign workers. There were close-up shots of placards being waved on picket lines demanding “British Jobs for British Workers”, repeating a disastrous promise by the then prime minister Gordon Brown at the 2007 Labour Party Conference.

Even to some on the left this looked uncomfortably like chauvinism, reminiscent of the dockers who marched to support Enoch Powell’s infamous anti-immigration “rivers of blood” speech in 1968. Media coverage went out of its way to confirm this interpretation.

In one BBC bulletin, a worker was filmed saying: “These Portuguese - we can’t work alongside of them”. But this turned out to be a gross distortion, and the BBC was forced to apologize for missing out the next sentence: “We’re segregated from them”.

The worker meant that they physically could not work with foreign workers, because they were prevented from doing so. The real reasons for the strike, carefully obscured by the mainstream media, shed light on some of the complexities underlying the working class anti-immigration backlash in modern Britain.

The Lindsey refinery’s employer, I R E M, had hired cheap, non-unionized workers from abroad. Not only did this threaten to break the workers’ union, it also meant that everyone else’s wages and conditions would be pushed down in a “race to the bottom”.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“We’ve got more in common with people around this world than with the employers who are doing this to us”, said Keith Gibson, one of the leaders of the strike and a member of the Trotskyist Socialist Party. B N P figures who tried to jump on the bandwagon were barred from the picket line.

The demands of the strike committee included the unionization of immigrant labour, trade union assistance for immigrant workers and the building of links with construction workers on the continent. This was the opposite of a racist strike.

However, the Lindsey strike was the exception rather than the norm. In an age of weak unions, the resentments behind the working class backlash against immigration have lacked this sort of commendable leadership.

The fear among large numbers of working-class people is that British jobs are being lost and wages are being forced down because of mass immigration. A glance at the figures might seem to support the conclusion that a majority of jobs are indeed going to immigrants.

Between New Labour’s victory in 1997 and its defeat in 2010, the number of jobs went up by 2.12 million. While the number of employed UK-born people has increased by 385,000, the number of workers born abroad has risen by 1.72 million.

That means that more than four out of every five jobs created in Britain since 1997 have gone to foreign-born workers. But this fails to take into account the fact that the British population is growing very slowly. There are problems with the figures available, not least because some foreign-born workers will now be British citizens, but they do give us a general picture.

The British-born population of working age has only gone up by 348,000 since 1997, while the non-British born working age population has risen by 2.4 million. Nearly a million Britons have left the country since then, and there are a staggering 5.6 million Britons living abroad: it is often forgotten that migration is a two-way process.

The bottom line is that the number of jobs going to British born workers has gone up more than the British-born working population has increased. Less than three quarters of non-Britons have had any luck getting a job. It is statistically, not true that immigrants are taking people’s jobs.

Many of our essential services depend on foreign workers. The National Health Service would have collapsed long ago were it not for the thousands of doctors and nurses from other countries who have sustained it almost since its creation.

Nearly a third of health professionals such as doctors and dentists are immigrants. However unfounded the fear of immigrants taking scarce jobs from natives, it has been allowed to take root in the popular imagination because of the continued decline of traditional, skilled jobs.

There has been no mainstream political voice to put this in the context of globalization and a lack of government support for manufacturing. Instead, we are bombarded on a daily basis by distorted propaganda from right-wing journalists and politicians.

When Gordon Brown made the spectacular misjudgement of pledging “British jobs for British workers”, he only seemed to confirm the view that the jobs had hitherto been going elsewhere. It might be expected that because immigrants would be willing to work for less, other workers would be forced to compete with them, thereby pushing everybody’s pay down.

A 2009 study by a leading Oxford economist and a senior Bank of England economist, found that wages were, overall, only slightly depressed by immigration. Their key finding was that the impact was not the same for everyone.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

It was those workers in the semi-skilled and unskilled service sector who suffered most. A 10 percent rise in the proportion of immigrants would cause a five percent reduction in pay for these groups. Another paper, for the Equality and Human Rights Commission, also found that the overall impact of immigration on wages was small.

Ironically, it discovered that those most affected were likely to be former immigrants, because they would be competing for jobs that do not require “language fluency, cultural knowledge, or local experience”.

Even so, it found that all workers in manual jobs could see their wages reduced because an employer could easily replace them with a foreign worker willing to accept less. The same was true for workers who were “marginal to the labour market”, those “who work in part-time low-skilled jobs and those who faced barriers to finding work, such as inability to travel.

Clearly, then, attitudes towards immigration are liable to depend on the class of the person who holds them. Indeed, prospective employers stand to gain from cheaper foreign workers. “The effect of immigration at the bottom of the labour market is different than it is on those people who are so pleased they can get a nice cheap nanny, or someone cheap to do the plumbing”, observes former Labour secretary of state for international development Clare Short.

When looking at the impact of immigration on jobs and wages, it has been increasingly fashionable among politicians and the media to contrast the hard-working immigrant to the layabout Brit. But it’s not, of course, a fair comparison.

After all, immigrants will have travelled hundreds or thousands of miles from poorer countries with the express intention of finding work. It is this that endows them with the qualities that employers find so desirable.

The impact of immigration has led the prominent Labour backbencher, John Cruddas, to describe it as a “wages policy” - that is, a device used to control the levels of pay. Crucially, former New Labour Cabinet Minister Hazel Blears says:

“There was actually an economic driver to keep the numbers coming because that kept wages down, in a way, and made us more competitive as an economy”. When a number of Eastern European countries joined the European Union in 2004, Britain allowed their workers to immediately enter and freely seek work.

None of New Labour’s immigration policies caused as much controversy, especially when only Ireland followed suit. Critics claimed that the decision led to a wave of cheap labour entering Britain, particularly from Poland.

“It clearly was madness for the government to allow the situation where Britain and Ireland were the only countries that allowed the accession states in before the two year gap”, says Ken Livingstone. “So they all came here. Now, it didn’t have an impact in London because we’re used to absorbing waves of immigrants.

But in a whole range of the country where they never had to absorb immigrants, in rural areas, a load of people turned up from Eastern Europe. The wages are depressed, they work harder, they get the jobs. It was devastating”.

To the extent that immigration does have an impact on wages, the tabloid-driven campaign has aimed at the wrong targets. If employers have used immigration as a means to push down people’s pay, then it is they who should face public opprobrium.

“My take on it is that you can’t blame workers who’ve come here to better their standard of living”, reasons miners’ leader Chris Kitchen. “Blame the employers who prefer to pay them, because they can pay them less. It’s not the migrant workers at fault for coming here to better themselves”.

Following Labour’s defeat in the 2010 general election and Gordon Brown’s resignation as party leader, the candidates to replace him fell over one another to deplore the effects of immigration. As Ed Balls, an erstwhile close ally of Gordon Brown, argued, immigration had had “a direct impact on wages, terms and conditions of too many people across our country - in communities ill-prepared to deal with the realities of globalization.”

His stance inspired Tory leader David Cameron to compare him to the racist comic caricature, Alf Garnett. But the reality is that the scrutiny has been directed at immigration, precisely in order to avoid dealing with issues that have a far greater impact on jobs and wages.

We have seen that the effect on wages is small - and indeed it can be corrected without clamping down on immigration, by, for example, increasing the minimum wage and preventing foreign workers being hired on lower wages or in worse conditions than other workers.

Wages have been stagnating or declining for millions of workers, even before the recession hit. Immigration is a long way down the list of reasons why. The huge pool of cheap labour available in the Majority world and the crippled state of British trade unions are far more important factors.

After all, company profits are booming, but employers are hoarding these billions, and there is no pressure on them to share. But the “race to the bottom” at the heart of modern globalization and the lack of trade union rights are not issues that politicians have any interest in addressing.

Jobs are being lost because of an economic crisis caused by bankers’ greed and the subsequent disastrous policies of the political establishment. Yet today’s mainstream politicians do not want to ask any questions that would challenge some of the most basic assumptions of the modern economic system.

Instead, they have focused attention on a secondary issue that enjoys the advantage of appealing to people’s prejudices, as well as the vociferous backing of the right-wing media. This backlash against immigration has led many to conclude that “the white working class” is racist.

In reality, the working class is far more ethnically mixed than the rest of the population. After all, nine-tenths of Britons are white. Once you leave big urban areas like London, Manchester and Birmingham, you could easily travel for miles without coming across a single non-white face.

Nonetheless, as trade union leader Billy Hayes puts it: “As ethnic minorities almost invariably suffer more social disadvantage, we can assume that over 10 percent of the working class are not white”. Ethnic minorities are disproportionately engaged in working-class jobs - and, in many urban areas, they are far more likely to dominate the lowest-status, low-paid jobs.

Take the retail sector in London. Ethnic minorities make up 35 percent of its workforce, and yet they represent a far lower 27 percent of the capital’s population. Fourteen percent of English bus and coach drivers are from an ethnic minority group, and non-whites are also disproportionately represented in catering, security and hotels and restaurants.

Half of Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers in the country are in jobs that pay less than £7 an hour, compared to less than 30 percent of whites. At the top of the social hierarchy, the contrast could not be greater.

Only 3.5 percent of partners in the UK’s top one hundred law firms come from an ethnic minority background. There is just one ethnic minority CEO among Britain’s top one hundred companies. In the financial sector, just 5 percent of men working in insurance pensions are from an ethnic minority.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

If you are working class, you are far more likely to rub shoulders with people from different backgrounds than those in elite professions or in the corporate world. The same goes for residential patterns. In London, the most diverse communities are overwhelmingly working-class, like Tower Hamlets, Newham and Hackney.

Middle class suburbs like Richmond, Kingston, and Bromley, on the other hand, have small ethnic minority populations. According to the latest census, there were over 100,000 children of mixed Asian and white origin, and 158,000 who were mixed Caribbean and white.

Nearly half of British Born black men have white partners. Given that ethnic minorities are far more likely to be in working-class jobs and live in working-class communities, it is safe to presume that this mixing is disproportionately happening in the working class.

Clare Short used to represent the poor, working-class constituency of Birmingham Ladywood, where most people hail from minority backgrounds. She agrees that working-class people mix with people from different ethnic backgrounds more than those higher up the social scale:

“You know, by and large in a place like Ladywood, it’s fabulous in the richness of the diversity of the people and the relationships they form, and the understanding of each other’s religion and histories. There’s something very rich that goes on there. The kids in school always say:

“We’re very lucky because we have the festivals of everybody”. The working class is still largely white; but less white, in reality, than everybody else. It cannot be said that the privileged elite is always a bastion of tolerance.

Middle-class or upper-class racism can often be more pernicious, while lacking the same economic drivers. Let us not forget Prince Harry, who was caught on camera describing an Asian soldier as a “Paki”. Anti-Semitism has long been the elite’s racism of choice.

I know of a public schoolboy whose father refused to buy him an expensive gold watch from Harrods, “because it looked too Jewish”. A lecturer tells me that when he mentioned to a public school-educated student that working-class people were more likely to have a relationship with someone from an ethnic minority, the student paused for a moment before asking: “Because they can’t find anything better?”

We should beware of going along with a superficial reading of the great twenty-first century backlash against immigration among working-class people. Anti-immigration rhetoric has gained traction for far more complex reasons than mere culture or race.

Indeed, many ethnic minority working-class people share the popular hostility to immigration. But at a time of growing insecurity about jobs and wages, immigration has provided a convenient scapegoat as well as an excuse to dodge questions that are far more relevant - but far more threatening to the status quo. Those responsible are playing with fire.

Right-wing populism is on the rise - and it is shamelessly courting working-class people. The B N P is unlikely ever to establish itself as a credible party, but it is an ominous portent of what could come. The populist right can also boast the presence of the United Kingdom Independence Party - UKIP, which came fourth in the 2010 general election with nearly a million votes, and second in the 2009 European elections.

Opposition to immigration and its supposed impact on wages and jobs is at the heart of the UKIP programme. More recently, a new far-right formation named the English Defence League has been orchestrating aggressive anti-Muslim demonstrations in cities across England.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

More mainstream right-wing forces have also jumped on the bandwagon: the Conservative backing Daily Telegraph has described the white working class as “Britain’s betrayed tribe”, allegedly marginalized by the advent of multiculturalism and mass immigration.

The danger is of a savvy new populist right emerging, one that is comfortable talking about class and that offers reactionary solutions to working-class problems. It could denounce the demonization of the working-class and the trashing of its identity.

It could claim that the traditional party of working-class people, the Labour Party, has turned its back on them. Rather than focusing on the deep-seated economic issues that really underpin the grievances of working-class people, it could train its populist guns on immigration and cultural issues.

Immigration could be blamed for economic woes; multiculturalism could be blamed for undermining “white” working-class identity. The reason this could happen is because the Labour Party ceased providing answers to a whole range of working class problems, especially housing, low wages and job insecurity.

It no longer offers an overarching narrative that working class people can relate to. To many former natural Labour supporters, it seems to be on the side of the rich and big business. No wonder so many working class people have concluded it is no longer a party for “people like us”.

To be fair, this phenomenon isn’t exclusive to Britain. The dramatic shift to the right of traditional left parties has opened the door to the far right across Western Europe, with groupings like the National Front in France’s former “red belt” and the demagogic Northern Alliance in Italy.

The rise of the far right is a symptom of a larger crisis: the lack of representation of working class people. Purged from politics, their identity trashed, their power in society curtailed and their concerns ignored, it is perhaps surprising that so few working class people have opted for parties like the BNP.

More have sat on their hands and refused to vote; others have voted for Labour with a clothes peg on their noses. A surge of right wing populism, mass political alienation, cynicism and apathy could have devastating consequences for British democracy.

It is not just the future of the working-class at stake. It is the future of all of us.

Conclusion: A New Class Politics?

Rise like Lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number -

Shake your chains to earth like dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you -

Ye are many -they are few.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Call to Freedom.

The demonization of the working class is the ridiculing of the conquered by the conqueror. Over the last forty years, the power of working class people has been driven out of the workplace, the media, the political establishment, and from society as a whole.

Ruling elites once quaked at the threat of working-class boots stomping towards Downing Street, of a resolute mass brandishing red flags and dog-eared copies of The Communist Manifesto. Back in the 1970s, right-wingers routinely complained that trade unions were the real power in the land.

Surreal as it now seems, it was the might of the working class that was once mocked and despised. But, today, with their power smashed to pieces, the working class can be safely insulted as tracksuit-wearing drunken layabouts, with a soft spot for Enoch Powell.

Feeble, feckless, rude, perhaps - but certainly not dangerous. When I asked Carl Leishman, the twenty eight year old call centre worker from County Durham, if he felt that working class people were represented in society, he laughed at the absurdity of the question. "No. Not at all!" Did he feel that they were ridiculed?

"Well, yeah, because there's nobody who will really stand up to it, because working class people don't generally have a voice. You can take the mickey out of a working class person as much as you want, because you know they're not going to get in the papers particularly, they're not going to get on the news, because they're not the people that can influence things really. So it's kind of pointless listening to them"

That is not to say class politics is dead and buried. On the contrary, it is flourishing in some quarters. In other words it has become the preserve of the wealthy and their political apologists. It has been at the heart of the demonization of the working class.

The first tenet of this class politics of the wealthy is simple - class does not exist. Class denial is extraordinarily convenient. After all, what better way to deflect attention from the fact that huge sums of money are being shovelled into the back accounts of the wealthy, while the wages of the average worker stagnate?

The expulsion of "class" from the nation's vocabulary by Thatcherism and New Labour has ensured minimal scrutiny of the manifestly unjust distribution of wealth and power in modern Britain. Pretending that the working class is no more - "disappearing" it, if you like - has proved particularly politically useful.

We have seen how the chav caricature has obscured the reality of the working class majority. As elite class warriors are fully aware, the working class has always been the source of political sustenance for the left. That the left is inextricably tied to the aspirations and needs of working-class people is reflected in the very name of the Labour Party.

Jones, Owen (2016). Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class. Verso, London UK.

If there is no longer a working class to champion, the left is devoid of a mission. It no longer has a reason to exist. If anyone dares to raise the issue of class, their arguments are ignored and they are slapped down as dinosaurs clinging to outdated, irrelevant nostrums - even as their right-wing critics shamelessly promote the sorts of economic theories that flourished in the late nineteenth century.

When Labour's deputy leader, Harriet Harman, had the temerity to float the controversial suggestion that someone's class background might just have an impact on the rest of their lives, the liberal Independent news paper was outraged.

"Britain is simply no longer the sort of class-divided country that Ms Harman paints", it retorted. Another fashionable idea among these class warriors is that people at the bottom deserve their lot in life. It was not for the government to redress inequalities, because the conditions of the poor would only improve if they changed their behaviour.

As the Independent editorial went on to acknowledge, ethnic minorities and women still faced discrimination, "but the country's biggest social blight today is an entrenched group of families and individuals at the bottom of the social pile who are failing to participate in the economic opportunities available in modern Britain".

The conclusion was clear. If these people want to get on, they can - but they are failing to do so. The brutal truth was that those at the bottom had only themselves to blame. It is not simply about holding people responsible for where they are in the pecking order.

Smearing poorer working-class people as idle, bigoted, uncouth and dirty makes it more and more difficult to empathize with them. The people at the very bottom, in particular, have been effectively dehumanized. And why would anyone want to improve the conditions of people that they hate?

We have seen how "aspiration" is presented as the means of individual salvation: that is, everyone's aim in life should be to become middle class. Both Thatcherism and New Labour have promoted this rugged individualism with almost religious zeal.

Rather than the old collective form of aspiration, based on improving the conditions of working class people as a whole, the new mantra was that able individuals should "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" and climb the social ladder.

Of course, it is based on a myth: after all, if everyone could become middle class, who would man the supermarket checkouts, empty the bins and answer the phones in call centres? But this glorification of the middle class is a useful ideological prop for the class system.

At the same time, lower middle class journalists and politicians have sneakily misrepresented what "Middle Britain" actually is. "One of the most successful things that the wealthy have done is to almost persuade the middle class that they're middle class, too", says maverick journalist Nick Cohen.

When lower middle class politicians and journalists have used the term "Middle Britain", they have not been talking about people on the median incomes - the median, after all, being only around £21,000 a year; they actually mean affluent voters in "upper Britain".

This is how modest tax rises on the wealthy can be represented as attacks on "Middle Britain", even though nine out of ten of us earn less than £44,000 a year. But politicians will argue that it is electorally impossible to introduce progressive policies that upset supposedly crucial, but completely misconstrued, "Middle Britain" swing voters.

It even became fashionable among lower middle class politicians and commentators to celebrate inequality. Inequality is good because it promotes competition, goes the theory, and it shows that the people at the top are generating wealth.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The corollary of this is the idolization of the rich as “wealth creators” and entrepreneurs, who have achieved success purely through their own hard work and talent. The class politics of the wealthy has proved extraordinarily effective at demolishing its opponents.

It loudly asserts - as Margaret Thatcher famously put it that “There is no alternative”. Politics that promote the interests of the wealthiest are presented as necessary for the well being of society as a whole. And of course, with the media, think-tanks and much of politics funded by the wealthy and powerful, these ideas have easily achieved domination.

When class politics is mentioned, it is normally understood to mean fighting the corner of working class people, whether with good, bad or naïve intentions. Not any more. Advocates of the class politics of the wealthy dominated Tony Blair’s New Labour.

It was a pretty stunning turnaround for a party specifically founded to represent the working class. How did it happen? The legacy of Thatcher’s smashing of the unions is certainly a major factor. For a century the trade union movement had been Labour’s backbone, ensuring that there was always some sort of working-class voice within the party.

But the unions’ diminished position within society gave successive Labour leaders a free hand to reduce their internal role. Such is the weakness of the unions that they have ended up repeatedly voting to renounce their own powers within party structures.

Four successive defeats at the hands of the Tories between 1979 and 1992 left Labour demoralized, and willing to accept almost anything to get back into power. Clare Short told me of the despair within Labour’s ranks because it “had lost so often, and felt it had let down the very people it existed to represent, and after losing in 1992 when people thought we were going to win, the whole party was desperate to win”.

Tony Blair was elected Labour leader in 1994 with around half the vote against leadership candidates who, Short believes, simply were not credible. Because of this desperation and demoralization, Blair and his followers were able to impose the Thatcherite settlement on the Labour Party.

Part and parcel of this settlement was the idea that everyone should aspire to be middle class. Little wonder that, when asked what her greatest achievement was, Margaret Thatcher answered without hesitation: “Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds”.

International politics played a part in it, too. After the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, it seemed as though there was simply no alternative to free-market capitalism. I asked former Labour Cabinet Minister James Purnell if he thought New Labour adapted to Thatcherism just as, decades ago, the Tories were forced to capitulate to the post war welfare state settlement.

“Yeah, I do. The combination of 1979 and 1989 meant that a little bit of the left’s optimism and confidence about itself died. Somehow, post-1989, a whole bunch of things were defined as, if not insane, then at least as slightly far-fetched, and therefore people on the left had to argue very, very hard to win arguments about overcoming market outcomes or reducing inequality.”

In such an ideological atmosphere, it is no wonder that New Labour got away with abandoning the party’s role as the political voice of working-class people. The calculation of its political strategists was, in the words of New Labour spin-doctor Peter Mandelson, that they “would have nowhere else to go”.

After all, lower middle class commentators often refer to working-class loyalty to Labour as “tribalism”. With all its implications of primitive, unthinking loyalty, this is a word used pejoratively and almost always towards what is patronizingly described as Labour’s “core vote”, rather than being applied say to the Tory electoral base in the Home Counties.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

It is certainly true that, partly out of fear and hatred of the Tories, huge numbers of working-class people thought of Labour as “their” party, come what may. When campaigning on the doorstep, Labour canvassers often report working-class voters talking about the party as kind of an errant relative who was testing their patience, but , after all, it was family.

Yet as the wheels began falling off the New Labour project, growing numbers of disillusioned working-class voters began to disprove the “nowhere else to go” assumptions of Blair and Brown’s strategists. New Labour did not factor in what in Sweden is called the “sofa option” - working class people sitting on their hands rather than reluctantly dragging themselves out to vote for their traditional party.

In the 2010 general election, over three-quarters of voters in the top, disproportionately Tory-voting category went out to vote. But only around 58 percent of working class voters turned out. The turnout gap between professionals and skilled or semi-skilled workers was a whopping 18 percent.

More voters overall identified Labour rather than the Conservatives as their natural political home, but the depth of disillusion was such that this was not reflected in votes. Refusing to come out and vote was one option: putting an “X” in a different box was another. In Scotland and Wales, huge numbers of working class voters defected to the welcoming arms of nationalist parties.

In the 2008 Glasgow East by-election, Glaswegians turfed Labour out for the first time since the 1920s and voted in the Scottish Nationalist candidate as a protest. In England, as we have seen, the racist B N P picked up the votes of hundreds of thousands of traditional labour voters.

The theory that Labour’s prospects for remaining in office were tied to keeping the middle classes onside has decisively been proven to be a myth. According to pollsters Ipsos Mori, the decline in support for labour between 1997 and 2010 in the top social categories was only five percentage points.

Even some of New Labour’s leading lights are waking up to the party’s loss at the hands of working-class disaffection. During his successful campaign for the Labour leadership following the 2010 general election, Ed Miliband described “a crisis of working class representation” - a phrase normally confined to left-wing conferences.

“Put it at its starkest, if we had enjoyed a 1997 result in 2010 among the working class, then on a uniform swing we would have won at least forty more seats and would still be the largest party in Parliament”, he observed.

Maverick Blairite Jon Cruddas calls for a return to what he describes as “early new labour”: that is, the period between 1997 and 2001. But of all the voters that New Labour ended up losing, half vanished in precisely those four years.

Of the five million voters that Labour has lost, four million abandoned ship when Tony Blair was at the helm. These voters did not drift to the right. After all, the Tory vote only went up by a million between 1997 and 2010.

The rot had set in early, but it was New Labour’s relentless sidelining of working class Britain that led to its thorough defeat in 2010. The defeat was not just electoral, it was political on a far more profound level. All the gains New Labour achieved for working class people relied on funding public services and social programmes with the cash flowing from the City.

But following the collapse of financial services and the installation of a Tory prime minister in Downing Street intent on slashing public spending, this model has been swept away forever. In Clare Short’s view, New Labour triumphantly believed that: “We’re a great success because we’re market-friendly , we’re business friendly, but we’re spending lots of money on poor people, so we’ve cracked it”.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The retreat from the politics of class is far from unique to the Labour Party. Across the whole of the left there has been a shift away from class politics towards identity politics over the last thirty years. The pounding suffered by the Labour movement under Thatcherism, particularly following the nadir represented by the defeat of the Miners' strike, meant that class no longer seemed to be a plausible vehicle of change for many leftists.

Identity politics, on the other hand, still felt radical and had achievable aims: history actually seemed to be on the side of those fighting for the emancipation of women, gays and ethnic minorities. In the 1950s and 1960s, left-wing intellectuals who were both inspired and informed by a powerful labour movement wrote hundreds of books and articles on working class issues.

Such work would help shape the views of politicians at the very top of the Labour Party. Today, progressive intellectuals are far more interested in issues of identity. In his epic *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Jonathan Rose published the results of a search he did using an online academic resource.

For the years 1991 to 2000, there were 13,820 results for "women", 4,539 for "gender", 1,862 for "race", and just 136 for "working class". Of course, the struggles for the emancipation of women, gays and ethnic minorities are exceptionally important causes.

New Labour co-opted them, passing genuinely progressive legislation on gay equality and women's rights, for example. But it is an agenda that has happily co-existed with a sidelining of the working class in politics, allowing New Labour to protect its radical flank while pressing ahead with Thatcherite policies.

Take all-women shortlists, promoted by New Labour to increase the number of women candidates standing as Members of Parliament. This is a laudable goal, but it has largely ended up promoting lower middle class women with professional backgrounds rather than candidates sharing the backgrounds of millions of working class women in low-paid, part-time, service sector jobs.

The left continues to champion the most marginalized groups in society - as indeed it should - but all too often this has been in search of something to "replace" the working-class with. A classic example is the Respect Party founded by George Galloway as a left-wing, anti-war alternative to Labour.

Respect rightly took a stand against the rampant Islamophobia that has gripped Britain in the era of the "war on terror". But Respect's electoral base was overwhelmingly Muslim areas, such as East London and parts of Birmingham.

It did not pitch to working-class people as a whole, instead, it substituted them for a Muslim community that was understandably particularly angered by the brutal invasion of Iraq. Class politics was abandoned for communalist politics.

"The left has accepted that it's still class based, but it's gone off on single-issue campaigns and not related them back to the class issue", says left-wing Labour MP John McDonnell. One of the "safe havens" that the left has retreated into is international politics, particularly when it comes to taking a stand against wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. Now, it would be unfair to portray this simply as the obsession of sandal-wearing middle-class liberals living in Islington.

That was certainly the image conjured by New Labour Minister Kim Howells back in 2006, in response to an anti war question from Labour MP Paul Flynn: "It is not enough to assume that if people eat the right kind of museli, go to first nights of Harold Pinter revivals and read the Independent occasionally, the drug barons of Afghanistan will go away. They will not".

Howells might be surprised to discover that middle-class people are actually more likely to support the Afghan war than working-class people. One typical Ipsos Mori poll in 2009 revealed that, while 52% of middle-class people supported the war, only 38% of working-class people did (Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

percent of the top social category backed the war, just 31 percent of the bottom social category backed the war in Afghanistan.

The problem comes with the priority given by the left to international issues. Many working-class people may oppose the war, but that does not mean their opposition trumps concerns like housing, or jobs. It is difficult to focus your energies on what is happening thousands of miles away when you are struggling to pay the bills, or your children are desperately searching for secure work or an affordable house.

While the BNP are cynically offering hateful solutions to many of these bread and butter issues, left wing activists are more likely to be manning a stall about Gaza outside a university campus. Again, an important issue: but the same energy and commitment that has been shown in opposing unjust foreign wars has not been applied to championing the pressing issues facing working-class people.

The time has rarely been so ripe for a new wave of class politics. After all, the relentless championing of the interests of the wealthy has had disastrous effects for all of us. The destruction of industry that began with Thatcherism left the economy dangerously reliant on the City.

The dismantling of council housing helped send house prices soaring, creating a housing bubble that is now imploding, and injecting record levels of debt into the economy. The crushing of the trade unions contributed to the stagnation of wages in the noughties, leading many to top up their income with credit and, in doing so, stoking up a debt-fuelled boom.

The credit crunch is, in part, blowback from the class war started by Thatcher over three decades ago. Dissillusionment with the free market has not been stronger or more widespread since the launch of what Tony Benn calls Thatcher's "counter-revolution" in 1979.

Polls consistently show overwhelming support for higher taxes on the wealthy. To add to the brew, Labour is out of office because it lost working-class support, and millions of disenfranchised working class people have abandoned the ballot box altogether.

This is why the biggest issue in British politics today is the crisis of working-class representation: those same people so often caricatured and dismissed as "chavs". "Tony Blair tried to bury it, but class politics looks set to return", was the headline of one Guardian column by Polly Toynbee, in which she observed: "over the years denying them-and-us class feeling may have alienated more voters than it won".

But what would a new class-based politics look like in twenty-first-century Britain? It is clear that only a movement rooted in the left can meet the challenge. The politics of the soggy centre have demonstrably failed to meet the needs and aspirations of working class people, driving millions either to apathy or into the clutches of the far right.

As the left's numerous disastrous experiments in bolting its agenda on to those other groups has shown, its own future as a political force depends on its re-establishing a base in working-class Britain. At the centre of a political agenda must be a total redefinition of aspiration.

"I think you start from the basic notion of aspiration", says Jon Cruddas. "Because this was the real cynical element within the worst elements of New Labour post-2001 - the way they stripped out from the notion of aspiration any communitarian element.

Any sense of the notion of duty, obligation, any sense of something that unites people, rather than the dominant atomized, consuming, acquisitive self". The new aspiration must be about improving people's communities and bettering the conditions of the working class as a whole, rather than simply lifting able individuals onto the ladder.

A return to class politics as it was practised and preached, say, in the 1970s, would not be appropriate. After all, the working class on which it was based has changed fundamentally. The old smokestack factory skyline is gone.

With it disappeared the largely male, industrial working class, with jobs-for-life passed on from generation to generation, and whole communities based around the workplace. A new movement has to speak to a more fragmented, largely non-unionized workforce marked by job insecurity and growing numbers of part-time and temporary workers.

The jobs they are doing are generally cleaner and involve less physical exertion, but they come without the same sense of pride and fulfilment that many of the old industrial jobs had. Skilled jobs with prestige have, in many cases, given way to shelf-stacking.

Class-based movements of the past looked solely to the workplace. This is still important: after all, it is what defines the working class and, on a day-to-day basis, it is what shapes working-class life. But, with people so much more likely to jump from job to job progressive movements today have to establish roots in communities as well.

In their own perverse way, that is exactly what the B N P have been doing: throwing themselves into community politics. From local fetes to dealing with anti-social behaviour, litter picking to campaigning for affordable housing, the B N P has, with varying levels of success, striven to establish a presence.

We have seen how working-class people are increasingly less likely to vote. Barack Obama owed his election as American president in 2008 to the mobilization of hitherto disenfranchised, poorer voters, regardless of how this movement was then squandered.

One of the priorities in this country must surely be to similarly mobilize those working class people who, because of the increasing irrelevance of politics to their lives, have become effectively disenfranchised. It will also mean straddling the internal divisions within the working class that widened under Thatcherism.

These should not be overstated. As John McDonnell puts it, "There have always been different elements within the working class. The difference between skilled workers and unskilled workers, the difference between temporary workers, and the rest of us".

The conditions of employed, homeownership working class people are so different to the conditions of people in social housing. Part of the problem is that unemployment has been depoliticized. The fight against it used to be one of the left's great crusades, as epitomized by the iconic Jarrow March in 1936.

Fewer people were out of work in the 1970s than today, but back then it was seen as the definitive political issue of the day. Margaret Thatcher's Tories savaged James Callaghan's government with the notorious "Labour Isn't Working" poster, when a million were out of work.

Because successive governments have manipulated unemployment figures using incapacity benefits, the terms of the debate have been changed. Unemployment becomes recast as a public health issue - and specifically about whether a sizeable chunk of claimants are really ill enough not to work.

The argument used by both New Labour and Tory politicians to drive claimants off benefits is essentially correct: individuals and their families are, generally speaking, better off with work. But they completely neglect to answer the question: "Where are all the jobs to put unemployed people into?"

Even where there are jobs available, they are often low-paid, temporary and of poor quality. Another core demand must surely be for decent, skilled, secure, well-paid jobs. It would not just be for the sake of the unemployed. It would also provide a possible alternative for many low-paid service sector workers.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

The thing we talk about is trying to have an industrial policy, says Eilis Lawlor from the New Economics Foundation. “That means actually deciding that you’re going to support and promote industries that would fill the ‘missing middle’ of skilled jobs, and you would tilt them spatially towards poor areas and areas that have been affected by recession, but also policies to target particular industries”.

The fag end of the last Labour government began toying with an industrial policy - but after thirteen years of collapsing manufacturing, it was nowhere near bold enough. But now, with even the Tories talking about “rebalancing the economy” and “Britain making things again”, there is ample political space to make the case for a new industrial strategy.

The campaign for good jobs could be the catalyst for far-reaching social change. Jobs could be created to help solve the deep-seated problems affecting working-class communities. Housing is one of the biggest crises facing many working-class families: a national programme to build socially owned housing would need an army of skilled labour, as well as stimulating the construction industry and in turn creating yet more good jobs.

As Defend Council Housing’s Alan Walter put it in the dying days of New Labour, now that the market had failed to provide for people’s needs it was time to “invest in building a third generation of first class council homes that are well built and designed to the highest environmental standards, with good community facilities and transport links, and we can finally get away from housing being something you speculate on and concentrate on providing homes for the twenty-first century”.

A jobs movement could also meet the challenge posed by environmental crisis. A “Green New Deal” that builds a thriving renewable energy sector and launches a national crusade to insulate homes and businesses could employ hundreds of thousands of people.

“I think there’s a role for government there in actually marrying its economic policy with environmental policy”, says Guardian economics editor Larry Elliott. As well as providing an array of new jobs, it would give working-class people a stake in the environment by transforming it into a bread-and-butter issue.

This is class politics with a green tinge. Clearly, these new jobs would not replace old ones, and nor should they. Get rid of all the cleaners, rubbish collectors, bus drivers, supermarket checkout staff and secretaries, for example, and society will very quickly grind to a halt.

On the other hand, if we woke up one morning to find that all the highly paid advertising executives, management consultants and private equity directors had disappeared, society would go on much as it did before: in a lot of cases, probably quite a bit better.

So, to begin with, workers need to reclaim a sense of pride and social worth. Doing so would be a big step forward in making the case that wages and conditions of low-paid jobs must be improved in order to reflect the importance they have in all of our lives.

We have seen how work in modern Britain is much more insecure than it used to be. British employers have more freedom to dispose of their workers than practically anywhere in the Western world. There is an army of temporary agency workers, lacking even basic rights, who can be dismissed at a moment’s notice.

As well as the feeling of insecurity that hire and fire conditions breed, it is thoroughly dehumanizing to be treated like chattel or a mere economic resource that can be thrown away as soon as it is no longer needed.

There have been recent cases of workers being sacked by text message or even by megaphone. Job security must be at the heart of a new progressive movement. But it must be about much more than wages and conditions. A new politics with class at its heart needs to address deep-seated alienation many workers feel, particularly in the service sector: the sheer tedium and boredom that often

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

accompanies routine, repetitive work. It is not just about skilling up jobs and providing variation in workers' daily tasks. It is also about giving workers genuine control and power in the workplace.

One of the ideas floated by the Tories before the 2010 general election was to create supposed workers' co-operatives in the public sector, offering a "power-shift to public sector workers" and "as big a transfer of power to working people since the sale of council homes in the 1980s", as then Tory Shadow Cabinet Chancellor George Osborne put it.

In reality, he was audaciously raiding traditional Labour language as a ruse to cover up the privatization of large pieces of the public sector. But this rhetoric could be taken at face value, upping the ante with the response: "Why not apply the same principle to the private sector?"

Such a call would be about bringing genuine democracy to the economy. With so many disillusioned with the ravages of the market, it would surely strike a popular chord. Instead of economic despots ruling over the British economy with nothing to keep them in check, key businesses could be taken into social ownership and democratically managed by workers - and consumers, for that matter.

It would be a real alternative to the old-style, top-down, bureaucratic form of nationalization introduced after World War 2 by Peter Mandelson's grandfather, Herbert Morrison. Working class people would be given genuine power, instead of being mere cogs in the machine.

Inevitably, solutions must be sought to working-class concerns that hitherto have been cynically manipulated by the right. For example, rather than dismissing the anti-immigrant backlash as ignorance and racism, a modern class-based politics has to understand it as the misdirected frustrations of working-class people at unanswered grievances.

If anti-immigrant sentiment is to be defused, it means reorganizing and tackling the issues that are really to blame and affect working class people of all colours, like the lack of affordable housing and secure well-paid jobs.

The tragedy is that the scapegoating of immigration has meant that the elites who are really responsible have been let off the hook. If working-class frustrations could be redirected towards those really responsible, there would be a genuine opportunity to unite working class people, regardless of background.

"Something like £70 billion is stolen from the Exchequer every year through tax evasion. This is never couched as ripping off the white working class", says Journalist Johann Hari. "But some poor Somali person running for their lives, they're ripping you off, rather than those ripping billions of pounds off."

A much healthier and more productive way to think about the divisions in our society is for white working-class people and immigrants to think of themselves on the same side, against the corporations and very rich people who are really ripping them off".

Anti-social behaviour is another good example of working-class concern that could be reclaimed from the right. Although overblown as an issue, it disproportionately affects people in working class communities and is a genuine blight on some people's lives.

On the one hand, a new class politics has to attack the root causes, like youth unemployment, poverty and lack of facilities for young people; on the other, it has to defend people from being terrorized in their own communities but without falling into New Labour's trap of stigmatizing young working-class kids.

"New Labour's emphasis on anti-social behaviour and attacks on civil liberties was about encouraging people to attack one another and blame one another for what was going on in their communities, rather than the system itself", says John McDonnell.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

“and that doesn’t absolve individual responsibility or anything like that - but it’s trying to get it into context. In every working class community you’ve always had rogues, you’ve always had people who behaved badly - and what you try and do is overcome that - but people do that by controlling their own communities.

It should go without saying that a challenge to the grotesque redistribution of wealth and power to the very richest over the last forty years is long overdue. Some might call this class war, but surely that phrase applies more appropriately to the fact that, while recession was ravaging workers’ living standards and throwing thousands out of work, the wealth of the top 1,000 richest people shot up by 30 percent between 2009 and 2010 - the biggest hike ever recorded.

Or the fact that, while the conservative led government is reducing corporation tax to 24 percent, one of the lowest rates in the developed world, VAT, a tax that disproportionately hits the poor, was increased to 20 percent. This is class war, and a new class politics must answer it.

While the financial crimes of the poor, such as benefit fraud, are frequently in the crosshairs of lower middle class politicians and journalists, the far greater financial crimes of the rich are largely ignored. That is why fire must be redirected from welfare fraud to tax evasion, which, as we have seen, costs the taxpayer seventy times more.

And, of course, the whole tax system has to be rebalanced so that the burden falls properly on the wealthy. After all, during the boom times, the profits of the wealthy increased by unparalleled amounts: there is certainly no lack of money at the top.

The objection is always: “Won’t the rich just flee abroad to escape the taxman?” Chartered accountant and former company director Richard Murphy points out that this was the argument used against the new 50 percent tax rate that was introduced in the dying days of New Labour for those earning £150,000 or above.

“It was said that they’re all going to be fleeing to Switzerland - but the number of applications to work in Swiss finance from the UK in 2009 was 7 percent down on 2008. And the total number of applications was just over a thousand, and most of them were from the backroom - the technical people, IT and administration - not from the dealing room”.

The six major corporations that left were not even paying tax in Britain in the first place. Indeed, despite all the controversy, the tax receipts flowing into the Treasury coffers were actually higher than estimated.

It will take a lot more than changing the tax system to stop the nation’s wealth being sucked into the bank accounts of the rich elites. There is little real pressure to stop them amassing huge riches while their employees wages stagnate or even decline.

At the heart of this scandal is the destruction of the power of workers as an organized force - that is, the trade unions. “There are studies that show that one of the features of more equal societies is stronger trade union movements”, says Professor Richard Wilkinson, co-author of the seminal book: *The Spirit Level*.

“I think the ability of people at the top, the bankers and chief executives and so on, to give themselves these huge bonuses reflects the fact they’re in a situation where there are no constraints on them. If there were strong trade unions and perhaps a union of employee representatives on the company board, it would become more embarrassing for CEOs to award themselves huge pay increases and bonuses while holding down wage demands from employees”.

The decline of the trade unions lies at the heart of many of the problems of the working-class: the fact that they don’t have a voice, their stagnating wages; their lack of rights in the workplace, and so on. As Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Tony Blair once boasted, even with New Labour's changes, the law remains "the most restrictive on trade unions in the Western world".

Although workers look for representation in the workplace, the anti-trade union laws have undermined the ability of trade unions to represent people. Despite all the hammering that trade unions have suffered, they remain by far the biggest democratic civil society organizations in the country, with over seven million members.

At the heart of the unions' weakness is the fact that they have more or less been evicted from the private sector. While over half of public sector workers are union members, it is only the case for 15 percent of their private sector counterparts.

The restrictive laws are partly to blame - as Ken Livingstone says, "the intervention of the state to guarantee fairness in employment could change it overnight" - but the nature of the hire and fire, fragmented service sector with its high numbers of temporary and part-time workers makes it difficult to organize.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the mission of trade unions was expanding from their relatively privileged skill base to recruit largely non-unionized unskilled workers. It was called "New unionism". If the trade union movement has a future, it needs a New Unionism that focuses specifically on organizing the new service-sector working class.

In the era of cuts and austerity, it also means that the unions have to reach out far and wide. "The need to form coalitions with user groups so that powerful enough alliances can be formed to defeat the cuts agenda of the government through extra-parliamentary action", says industrial relations expert Professor Gregor Gall.

"Unions need to do this as a union movement, not just as individual unions. The rationale here is that defending jobs and pay is synonymous with defending the quality and quantity of public services". For example, the argument has to be made not just about public sector workers facing the sack, but also about the loss of services for users, and the economic knock-on effects imperilling the jobs of private sector workers, too.

Above all, the unions have to adapt to the working class as it is today. "You have to recognize that the labour movement is different, and it's never going to be what it was thirty years ago", says trade union leader Billy Hayes.

"It can regain its strength, but it's looking for that next generation of leaders who will come up with ideas and initiatives that people like me aren't capable of developing". It will be said that a movement with class at its heart will alienate the middle class. But there is no automatic rule that it has to. One politician put it to me that it was "the politics of despair" to stand on the most conservative of programmes, merely "because you'll never convince those people in Surbiton".

That was Hazel Blears, a stalwart defender of New Labour. Most middle class people cannot afford to go private and want good, properly funded local schools and hospitals. Polls show that middle class people support higher taxes on the rich - and indeed there is no reason why they would be any less happy to see the wealthy pay their fair share than a working class person.

It is in the interest of middle-class people to live in a society with less crime, and reducing the social causes is a major way of achieving that. All groups in society benefit from greater equality - including the middle class.

But a new class politics cannot simply be a British phenomenon. As the ultra-rich business elite has globalized, so too must working-class people. With multinational corporations able to hold elected governments to ransom, only the power of a strong, international labour force can meet the challenge.

Jones, Owen (2016). *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso, London UK.

Only by making common cause with the burgeoning workforces of India and China can British workers hope to stem the consequences of a global “race to the bottom” in pay and conditions. It would be tempting to make all sorts of doom-laden, apocalyptic predictions about what will happen if such a movement fails to get off the ground, and warn darkly of riots and revolutions.

The reality is just downright depressing. The working class will remain weak and voiceless. They will still be the butt of jokes at middle-class dinner parties, detested in angry right-wing newspaper columns, and ridiculed in television sitcoms.

Entire communities will remain without secure, well-paid work, and the people that comprise them will continue to be demonized for it. Living standards will go on stagnating and declining, even while the rich rake it in like never before.

Ever fewer working-class people will bother to vote. Right-wing populism will tap into growing disillusionment and fury at the manner in which working class people have become so despised. Mainstream lower middle class politicians will continue to focus their energies on satisfying the demands of a small, wealthy elite, while growing ever more indifferent to the needs of an increasingly apathetic working class.

Politics will revert to what it was in the nineteenth century: essentially, a family argument between competing wealthy factions. At its heart, the demonization of the working class is the flagrant triumphalism of the rich, who, no longer challenged by those below them, instead point and laugh at them.

As the Conservatives push ahead with a programme of cuts that makes the working class pay for the crimes of the elite, they have much to laugh at. But it does not have to be this way. The folly of a society organized around the interests of plutocrats has been exposed by an economic crisis sparked by the greed of the bankers.

The new class politics would be a start, to at least build a counterweight to the hegemonic, unchallenged class politics of the wealthy. Perhaps then a new society based around people's needs, rather than private profit, would be feasible once again.

Working class people have, in the past, organized to defend their interests, they have demanded to be listened to, and forced concessions from the hands of the rich and powerful. Ridiculed or ignored they may be, they will do so again.

