

Welcome to the working class

I read D. Hunter's 'Chav Solidarity' in the last months, an account of his life and political development growing up poor in the UK. I found his work raw, profound and deeply honest, and I'd list it as essential reading in trying to get to grips with class divisions in the UK. At the same time, it really brought a heightened sense of awareness with regards to my own class background and privilege as a middle-class person, and the way in which middle-class people, including myself, shy away from honest exposure of the operation of their class background. Inspired by D. Hunter's work, I feel that it's important to write about this, even if I feel apprehensive and full of shame. We need to talk about class more and what it means. It's painful to write about. If working class people read this article I'm sure it's also painful to read. Why do you want to hear about some middle-class person's over-abundant privilege? Isn't this just another middle-class person taking up space?

Probably it is. Probably the darker recesses of my subconscious are egoically performing some kind of virtue signalling or ally theatre that won't actually benefit anyone with less privilege. On the surface of my thoughts and feelings though, from my experience of being me and knowing what a divided culture we live in, I think we need to connect with and process the places that we've come from, in the hope that we can change patterns we've got into and try and do something better. So here we go.

I grew up in a lower middle-class family. My mother spent most of her working life as a secondary school teacher and my father has mostly been a maker and repairer of stringed instruments. Although that already sounds like a world away from working in the coal pits for a living, I also don't think it sounds particularly grand. I grew up in a terraced house with a small back garden and went to a state school. However, although my parents didn't have particularly high incomes, what I became increasingly aware of as I was growing up was that there were some things that seemed to be different for me than some of my contemporaries. For example, there always seemed to be some kind of background money that came through whenever there was a bit of a fix. When my parents were trying to buy a house, for example, the mortgage company was refusing to lend due to some structural damage, and £20,000 from my grandmother surfaced to get the repair work done.

What I was also acutely aware of from an early age was that somehow my accent seemed to pit me apart. I spent the first three years of my schooling living in a poor Welsh coal-mining village in the South Valleys. The local coal pit was the first one to be impacted by Thatcher's pit closures so the kids I spent those years with had the knock on effect of the poverty and unemployment that it caused. At school the kids called me 'posh' because of my Englishness and at home my parents laughed at me as I absorbed the local accent. My parents were never comfortable in that village, though they made the most of it and my mum joined the Red Choir, but being very English people with strong Received Pronunciation accents they sensed they were out of place.

So the accent of my family and the 'magic money' were two indicators that I was slightly different. As I grew up, it became clear to me both consciously and subconsciously that there was no way I was going to grow up sounding like my parents. We moved to the South East when I was about 8, and by that time the accents of me and my brother were a bit of a car crash; kind of south Welsh combined with the accent of the Queen. My accent developed to be a mild south-east accent, one of those ones that doesn't really mean anything and isn't from anywhere, but also isn't a middle-class 'BBC' accent. I guess my accent and vocabulary in general got modified over time (both consciously and subconsciously) by how much I got laughed at. And I'd believe that I'd developed a solid south-east accent only to be told by working class kids that they could tell I was posh. So the lessons that came out of this one facet of who I am are telling of a lot of the class stuff that goes on. I didn't want to sound like my parents because I knew that it was not a route to fitting in (not that modifying my accent helped much with that one). I also developed a sense that a generic middle

class accent is abrasive to people and inhibits the development of connection. So it just wasn't in my interests to maintain a posh accent. And in any case I had a lot of different influences from people from different backgrounds as I was growing up. I say the following with a sense of embarrassment because I've never talked about it before, but I sculpted my language use in certain ways so that I could tread the line between poshness and other parts of my life. I have a 'glottal stop', meaning that I drop a lot of my t's, which makes me sound less posh, but I don't turn my 'th's' into 'f's', such as saying 'fing' instead of 'thing' because I think that it would make me sound too much like I'm trying to be working class when I'm clearly not. In any case working-class people always know that I'm middle-class, but overall I think it was the sense of being posh that I was trying to shed. Overall I think I succeeded.

But I am posh. Much as it pains me to say it, I come from posh. The meaning of 'posh' is an acronym for 'Port Outwards, Starboard Home.' The origins of the term 'posh' are not completely clear, but is often cited to be a shipping term for the moneyed classes travelling to and from Britain and colonial India. On the way outward, they wanted cabins on the left side of the boat (port) and on the way home the right (starboard) so that they could get the best of the sunshine in either direction. A branch of my family on my mother's side is French in origin – the 'De Chazals'. For a long time they lived as colonials on the island of Mauritius. There are a number of family photos of them looking terribly fancy and colonial. This is an accepted part of my family history, but what is not talked about, or at times barely touched on, is that to have lived in colonised British Mauritius probably meant to have had slaves.

I found a database online where you can enter your family's name and it will reveal to you how many slaves your family owned as part of the slave owner register. This information is available because in 1834, the slave trade was ended and British ex-patriots (or people who lived in Britain and owned slaves in other lands) registered how many slaves they had with the British government and were then compensated for their loss. It was the biggest government payout in British history until the 2008 banking crisis. My own surname is 'Wilkinson,' which is such a common name that it's not going to yield much in terms of knowing what your actual family got up to. So because De Chazal is such an uncommon and distinctive name, I entered it into the database, and there it was, irrefutable, that between them, various members of the De Chazal family owned more than 700 slaves on the island of Mauritius. The sense of shame I felt on learning this was predictably huge¹.

When I've brought it up with other family members, though, their response has been, 'oh, well lots of people had slaves in those times', or 'I guess I kind of knew that but also I'd rather not know.' I think these reactions are significant because I believe that probably beneath those brush-offs are the same feelings that I felt, feelings of guilt and shame. I also believe that if we are going to move on culturally, it's the responsibility of those of us whose middle-class-ness has come down the generations, to really work on taking ownership of what our families built their lives and privileges upon, and what we still inadvertently benefit from. We need to process the guilt and shame because if we don't, it plays itself out in our relationships in all sorts of ways. I have a theory (which I don't think can be proven) that a lot of the 'do-gooder middle-class charity work' that people do is probably because on some level people know that they need to make recompense for their family history. But until we process the guilt and shame, we're always going to be 'giving charity', meaning doing things for people that make us feel better but are most likely patronizing and unhelpful to the people on the receiving end, because the sense of superiority that we get from do-gooding prevents us from feeling the guilt and shame. I would like to think that if we collectively did the emotional processing work, we might be able to start doing more useful things in the world,

¹ The other thing that is noteworthy here is that it's really unclear what on earth a French family was doing receiving money from the British state for the loss of their slaves. It turns out it's because Mauritius was a French colony before it was a British one.

rather than things we want to believe are useful but actually just make us feel better on a superficial level.

The old adage, ‘what’s in a name?’ is really relevant. The name ‘Wilkinson’ is from my dad’s side of the family. By having this name, it acts as something of a masking of my wealthy origins on my mother’s side. My father’s family is historically not nearly as wealthy as my mother’s, which is reflected in the name Wilkinson. However, I believe they were middle-class for quite some generations, which as I understand were quite related to being in the clergy. Before that there’s some history of being rural land workers, but it’s all a bit vague. If you’ve got a name like ‘Wilkinson’ or ‘Jones’ or ‘Smith’, I think it feeds into your identity as being an ordinary person that is set apart from people from the upper classes. It means that tracing your family line is not all that viable because there are so many people with your surname, and in any case your family history is likely not to have been recorded. If you have a family name like ‘Bathurst’, it’s likely that you’ll be fully aware of your family’s history; you’ll still have an entitlement to land and probably have portraits of your ancestors lining the hallways of the manor house. There’s something that gives a sense of your own power from knowing who you descended from.

Another name in my family lineage is ‘Donald’, which was my mother’s maiden name, and the name of a Scottish clan. I never thought much of it growing up, except that I knew that we had our own family tartan. Because I didn’t grow up in Scotland, a few years ago I went on a trip round the West coast to get to know it better. I spent a few days on the island of Islay, which I’d heard was the place that my branch of the Donalds had come from, and in that time, stumbled across a museum that was devoted to the Donald clan. Through this I came to learn that the Donalds had for some centuries held great power in the western islands of Scotland, so much so that the head of the clan was actually ‘the Lord of the Isles’. In the mid sixteenth century, this title was wrested from the Donalds by James IV of Scotland. The title came to land with the British crown, and to this day it is the Prince of Wales who remains Lord of the Isles. My Donald ancestors moved to the mainland, and at some point down the family line became doctors, which was passed down for several generations to include my grandfather, Professor Ian Donald, who was responsible for the development of the use of ultrasound in pregnancy.

All this sounds uncomfortably grand. What is striking about it is the lack of knowledge or attention that my family paid to this history, but to me it’s still there, feeding into our sense of identity. I had a very open and honest discussion with a friend of mine who’s working class, and one of the things that really struck me was that he said the way that it made him feel when learning about my family history was that his own family wasn’t important. Culturally we have a notion of ‘important families’, and if you don’t understand yourself to come from an important family, it follows that you have a sense that you aren’t important, and conversely, that if it’s been imbued in you that your family is important, you’re more likely to believe you are too (the Royal Family being the prime example).

Although I’m a very middle-class person, a high proportion of the most important relationships in my life outside of my family have been with people from a working-class background, particularly working-class people who are trying to navigate entry into a middle-class world, such as a middle-class school, university or activist scene. I’ve always been something of an outsider myself, and find most social groupings extremely weird and anxiety-inducing, so somehow it’s been natural to develop relationships with other people who feel like an outsider and have a sense of ‘WTF is going on here?!’ - and many of those people have been from working class backgrounds. I’ve therefore had the privilege of receiving working-class insight. I’ve also had embedded middle-class classism highlighted to me frequently, which has enabled me to develop more of a classism radar.

Of course, within this, my own classism has been pointed out to me more times than my ego likes to bear. I've made all sorts of terrible blunders where the classism of my thinking has been pointed out, and although I like to think that I've got better at identifying my own classism, this will always be a work in progress. I've also felt awful embarrassment when working-class friends have been subject to classist remarks in middle-class social settings. There are some things which are so deeply engrained in middle-class thought that we remain entirely unconscious of their classist origins, but they always entail looking down on people, and I include lefties and liberals as being as condescending as anyone else. The examples of this which to my mind are the most common (but a working-class person would be able to tell more) are: mimicking or making fun of working-class accents; snobbery around spelling, grammar and punctuation, particularly the use of apostrophes; maintaining views of the cultural, social or intellectual inferiority of working-class people – such as deriding people for being overweight or having poor diet, for voting against their interests, making certain decisions, or having certain tastes in music or clothes; frowning on people or behaving frostily towards people for not following middle-class codes of reserve, politeness and niceties, and dehumanising people by casting them as 'chavs,' 'proles,' or 'the masses.'

All of this can be done while still maintaining a stance of being left-wing and liberal. In addition, without explicitly stating middle-class superiority, there's an underlying belief system of superiority at play. And it's my sense that it's this belief system that leads to and upholds middle-class entitlement in all areas of social life – to education, social networks, inheritance, profession, property and even ideology – in all these areas we have an unquestioned sense of place. We learn that we're special or different in some way – with unique abilities and aptitudes to bring to the world, that we can be or do anything that we want, that we have the capability to make the world a better place for 'those less fortunate.'

I feel that now is a good moment to start shooting our middle-class superiority complex out of the water. Feel free to add on your own examples. From where I'm standing middle-class people, including myself, maintain a double standard of importance and entitlement whilst simultaneously not doing anything important at all. There are the occasional middle-class people who, due to the support of an entire class system meaning that they don't have to grow their own food or fetch their own water manage to do something great. Most of us do not, and ride out on the few people who actually have. Instead, we produce mountains of PhD theses that no-one will ever read or benefit from. We make a living from specialist knowledge such as legal knowledge that in any sane system of law, would be easy to access and understand. We come up with all sorts of useless businesses that benefit no-one. We think it's okay to own property and make money out of other people utilizing it to meet their basic needs. We produce rubbish art and then generate all sorts of pretension about how great it is. We do one degree after another followed by several Masters courses and then train to be a plumber or become a van driver instead. It's supposed to be migrants that are stealing the jobs, but migrants do the jobs that people from the UK won't do. I wonder how many middle-class people are out there who could be said to be 'stealing working class jobs'. And no-one holds us accountable for being useless or treats us like we are.

In addition, most middle-class people are boring and neurotic and obsess over things like diet and nutrition, even though we have the best access to nutrition on the entire planet (yes, I'm guilty of that too). Middle-class people seem to be mostly emotionally stunted, hung up on being nice rather than being honest, and have all sorts of addiction problems that are socially prescribed – such as drinking unhealthy amounts of alcohol most evenings. We distract ourselves with pointless activities such as choosing nice tiles for the bathroom or playing golf or driving our kids around to things they don't really want to do anyway and would rather be out in the street with the other kids and a football causing mischief. We live our lives in a void of meaning where we have to run off to culturally appropriated iowaska rituals in Peru to make sense of it all. We have oversized carbon

footprints whilst we blame working-class people for going on holiday, and we think we're radical for reading 'The Guardian' and believe that Radio 4 contains actual news.

At this point it feels important to highlight what a very ordinary person I am. In contrast with a family line with former grandeur, and an ancestor with medical achievements, I have to say that I'm a highly under-achieving person. I'm terrible at academia, I'm thoroughly uncompetitive, I handle stress spectacularly badly, I've never had ambition or aspirations, and mostly I'd do just about anything other than focus. My middle-class super power is my awesome aptitude for spelling and punctuation (including apostrophes!), but that's about the high point of my achievements.

Essentially, though it pains me to say it, and though I've attempted to live a life of meaning, I'm the lumpen middle-class, riding out the last vestiges of social, cultural and economic privilege that my family line is imbued with. But we never talk about the 'lumpen middle-class' - it's a phrase that just doesn't exist. It's Marx's 'lumpen proletariat' that are seen to be the problem, but that invisibilises how complacent and unhelpful the middle class really is.

I think something that working-class friends and acquaintances have been struck by is how middle-class people seem to know things or know people that give them access to what they want, and that this mostly happens legally and legitimately. but if that's not possible, there are other ways as well. This plays out in our movements for social change as much as anywhere else. For example, in those halcyon days of Housing Benefit, before the advent of Universal Credit, you could start a housing co-operative, get loanstock to fund it from inherited wealth, and then receive Housing Benefit to pay off the mortgage. Of course, Housing Benefit always was a way in which state money generated by the public is funnelled towards private wealth, and the housing co-op example is a slightly more ethical version, in that it creates a permanent structure for people to live in and have control of. However, the point of this example is that although those of us who have middle-class privilege may have wonderful intentions, what we do time and time again is create ways of benefiting ourselves – which is to say benefiting only people of our class background, even if our motives are to create something that will benefit the collectivity rather than the individual.

And yes, that's something I'm guilty of as well. Because of my under-achieving nature (a.k.a. laziness), combined with my desire for social change, I can see with hindsight that I'm a middle-class opportunist; I've always kept my eyes open for opportunities which have meant that I don't have to follow a career path or be trapped in full-time wage labour, whilst feeling that I'm doing something of meaning by contributing to cultures for social change (even if those cultures are often questionable and have a negligible effect on the world outside them). In all honesty, I got through school mostly through the osmosis of growing up in a middle-class family rather than my own hard work, and I don't know how I got through university as I found I was just about incapable of reading more than a couple of pages of a book. Post-university, I mostly got by on a combination of temporary jobs, travelling, claiming benefits, living in communities, staying in squats, following activist opportunities such as helping to run trainings, and at one point a dose of a few thousand pounds of inherited wealth.

And then two things happened. The first one was the economic crash of 2008. The second one was that in 2010 I turned 30. It would take some years to understand the impacts of the economic crash on the opportunities I was following. In terms of turning 30, my needs changed. I started to need much more stability, which included a stable income. I realised that if I didn't do something, nobody was ever going to employ me apart from on a temp job basis, so I moved to the city and kept my eye out for opportunities, such as I have become accustomed to doing. It worked for some years – I landed two part-time charity jobs which made up my income, one in a community garden and one as a teacher of ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages – teaching beginner's literacy to migrants who'd had little or no access to schooling. Both my jobs were in line with my

ethics and both gave me a sense of doing meaningful work, neither of which I'd had from employment before.

Eventually, the community garden lost its lease, bringing the project and my job to an end, and neoliberalism made mincemeat of my ESOL job (but that's another story). At that point, something about the effects of the economic crash started to become clearer – that alongside austerity and the erosion of public services provided by the state, came the erosion of the cultures outside of the state that I'd been a part of trying to create. Voluntary sector jobs, which were often formalised versions of work done by community organisations, became increasingly competitive, and in any job I applied for, I never got a look-in. The small pots of funding that all sorts of projects had been reliant on became increasingly inaccessible. And because people no longer apply for state benefits unless they are more than desperate, all sorts of creative work that was done by unemployed labour has been eroded. Everyone has less time, and there's less space to do anything as it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain community spaces. How we wistfully hark back to the glory days of the nineties and noughties.

In the last years since I lost those jobs, I had a bunch of rotten, poorly paid jobs with chaotic employers, and so instead I've resorted to making an income pulling weeds in people's back gardens. It's hard work, it's boring and pointless, it's inconsistent and dominated by the weather, but I don't have the headfuck of a bad boss or a chaotic, neoliberalized organization. In terms of housing, I've been routinely subjected to the vagaries of the rental market; to expensive, chaotic and substandard accommodation. Of course I've complained about it all (and complained and complained). It's because it's shit, but it's also because I'm middle-class and entitled. It's because I'm angry that I can't find meaningful work to do for a living, even if I understand that meaningful work, in which you have a sense of autonomy and control, is a high privilege that the vast majority of people don't have access to. It's because my sense of identity is built upon feeling that I'm doing good things in the world, even if those things are small, and weeding for wealthy people just doesn't cut it.

A friend of mine, who's from a working-class background, knew I was struggling and at one point offered to listen to my woes. When I'd come to the end of my droning, she poignantly said, 'welcome to the working class.' And in one way that's true; after generations of middle-class wealth and privilege, I've very effectively managed to give myself a class downgrade that in the current economic circumstances seems hard to come back from. But ultimately I'll never be working-class. Culturally I'm an entirely middle-class person. I've got a huge amount of social and cultural capital from my class background. Economically, I've got the potential of future inheritance when my parents die and their house is sold, assuming that this wealth doesn't go on social care in the meantime. And even now, my parents have sold their house and bought a flat so that they can pass on some money for me to put down as a deposit on a property, which my partner and I will fully own by the time we're 70. There but for the grace of my social, cultural and economic capital go I.

I've done a reasonable amount of middle-class bashing in this article. The purpose of this is not to beat our superiority complexes into submission so that we end up feeling terrible about ourselves. This is only counterproductive – guilt and shame are as useless as arrogance, and keep us in the superiority/inferiority binary. The purpose is to highlight that these complexes exist and that in building awareness of how this belief system is unconsciously passed on and played out, we can start to generate a sense of self that isn't comprised from a basis of feelings of superiority and entitlement. We need to be able to identify within ourselves when we have those feelings and beliefs, and deconstruct them so that we can come to a place of feeling equal to people of any class background. Class and class divisions have been constructed over centuries, and what we're a product of isn't our fault, but we've still got to find ways of taking responsibility. I hope that we can

start to build from that place. I hope that from that place, as middle-class people we can get over ourselves, give up trying to control things, let marginalised people take the lead, and start to collectivise the wealth that we're currently saving for a rainy day for ourselves. For myself I know I've still got work to do on that one as I desperately try and claw my way out of the rental market. But to paraphrase D. Hunter, if we believe that wealth really belongs to us only as individuals, we're all fucked, regardless of our class background. I now suggest getting on with reading his work.

<https://www.chavsolidarity.com/>