

Where is “The Left”? “Are We Being Served”

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Central to us on the left is the dilemma of a seemingly indifferent working class to the changes that impact directly not only on our material well-being but on the corporatisation of our cultural lives. Some argue that it's down to the prevailing sense of powerlessness as the gulf between those who govern and the governed, deepens and widens. But there is perhaps another explanation for our disenfranchisement; the role of the 'middle class' as a mechanism of social control.

Both my parents were what you would call working class. My mother, who left school at fourteen, worked on the stage as a chorus girl (the Tiller Girls) and in pantomime before becoming a 'housewife' and my father, a self-taught engineer/toolmaker and professional musician and trade union organiser for the Musicians Union, left school without any formal qualifications (that I know of) at about the same age. Instead, he went to [evening classes](#) to improve his language skills and knowledge of the world and how it worked.

Yet both were communists and by any definition, intellectuals. So were they both still working class? What makes one working class? What is it to be 'middle class'? Is there such a thing as middle class or is it yet another illusion created by capitalism? After all, if you sell your labour, whether by the hour or by salary, aren't you still working class? Or is your education (or lack of it) the definition? Or is it perhaps some combination of education, income and 'status'? Isn't the myth that we all aspire to becoming middle class (and as current events show, how easily it is to be thrust back whence you came)?

I think I was perhaps the third or fourth person in my entire family to get a higher education and that simple, yet irrevocable act of going to university, separated me from my peers. Indeed created a gulf. 'Rising out' of the working class was and perhaps still is, seen as a progressive step and no doubt, achieving a higher education, in theory at least—but given the role of the universities as weapons of control, it's one that I question—gave me access to opportunities denied the great majority of my peers. But at what price? Perhaps the price of forgetting my roots.

Our roots, we are often reminded, are the anchor of our lives, both individually and collectively. But whose roots are they? Our roots are what define us, or so the theory goes. Living in Africa, I learned that the Ancestors are central to most peoples' lives and although for me, a symbolic gesture, calling on the Ancestors for advice, creates an unbreakable link with one's past. Moreover, a link that is in many respects, impervious to the propaganda of capitalism.

One of the things I learned during my time living in Africa, was the importance of acknowledging the existence of the ancestors, although for me it translated into being connected to the past rather than believing in them literally. For

through a connection to the ancestors, the past becomes solid ground rather than shifting sand. The ancestors are a transmission line to the past that remains stubbornly unbroken. Through the ancestors, a different history is preserved and carried down, not by education, books, or TV. It is both a private conversation and a collective memory, as in speaking to one's ancestors you are also speaking to their time, calling upon their experience, their wisdom. - ['Listen to your Ancestors'](#), 18 October 2003

Yes, my Art School education was, for me, a privilege. It gave me five years of freedom, without the pressure to 'earn a living' (back then they actually paid you to go to college!). In exchange however, it was required of me to dump my past, forget my Ancestors, the working class. It was an experience I was never to really accept. It was not until I left this country and moved to New York, where I found myself in a culture doubly damned by capitalism, the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem (and beyond), that my working class roots were accepted. There I experienced our communality of interests and struggle and my skills and experience found a real home. It was quite an eye opener for me to be accepted into a community in a way that I had never experienced in London, my birthplace.

Currently, there is a major retrospective of Manchester-born artist, [Lowry](#), an avowedly working class artist, who even today, has his credentials as it were, questioned, largely because he was avowedly working class. His work has variously been labeled as primitive, crude, naive and unsophisticated. Yet, commodity-wise his works now sell for tens of thousands of pounds (and perhaps explains why in spite of his 'crude', 'primitive' and 'naive' technique, he now warrants a major retrospective).

What this does reveal however, is the contradictions of a culture whose identity is determined almost entirely by our elites. To be working class is to be uncultured, uncouth and uncool (at best, an historical hangover). Just look at how working class life is portrayed on television and all of it produced by an intellectual elite that hasn't the foggiest idea of what working class life is really like. Of what it's like not to have the tools of a decent education, or the resources to realize your dreams? The odd one like me, who somehow make it through are the exception that proves the rule.

So what am I and those like me, who have allegedly 'risen' out of their class (Michael Caine notwithstanding)?

This issue has plagued me since my art school days, where art schools were (and are) almost exclusively the domain of the 'middle classes' and 'Art' an intellectual pursuit shrouded in the mystique of a hidden language of form and ultimately determined by the 'guardians of taste' in the shape of critics, galleries and a parasitical academia, let alone the bozos who buy it, largely as an investment, it should be added.

'Working class' art was, as the example of Lowry so clearly demonstrates, inferior to 'high art'. Anyway, what the hell is working class art? More to the point, what is working class culture?

The bottom line is, that in a capitalist world, working class culture, in all its forms, from football to rock 'n roll, to hip-hop is a bottomless reservoir of creativity that the ruling elites could never, ever produce, not in a million years. All they can do is appropriate, market and valorize. These are the vampires of capitalism, who suck the creative life out of us and in the process impoverish our cultural lives as they corporatise our culture.

The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theater, go dancing, go drinking, think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save and the greater will become that treasure which neither moths nor maggots can consume Ñ your capital. The less you are, the less you give expression to your life, the more you have, the greater is your alienated life ... So all passions and all activity are submerged in greed ð Karl Marx, Notebooks, 1844

One of my favourite quotations from Papa Marx. It's interesting to note that even before the end of WWII and the victory of the Labour government, in 1944 it was the previous (largely) Tory government that produced the then new Education Act, not the Labour Government. Education was far too important to be left even to reformist socialists like [Beveridge](#) and the Tories spelt it out in no uncertain terms and explains why, unlike the National Health Service, it was the Tories not the Labour government who introduced it.

The Butler Act as it was called after the then Tory education minister RAB Butler, recognized that if there was to be 'universal' education up to the age of fifteen, then it was incumbent on the state to make sure that those 'educated' were immersed in the ideology of capitalism (my high school 'history' text book stopped at 1914). Thus the so-called tripartite education system was created, with 80% of those in secondary education not even getting a chance at higher education or even some kind of formal certificate. Instead, they were relegated to so-called Secondary Modern schools and leaving school aged 15 for either menial office or factory work.

At best, the Butler Act was a nodding recognition that teaching the 'Three Rs' simply didn't cut it in the postwar world. After all, education hadn't changed much since the early 1900s. Churchill, along with most of his class, wanted nothing to do with even the minimal reforms of the 1944 act. Educate the labouring classes? Are you kidding! And it's through this understanding that I was to get a sense of just how backward and reactionary our capitalist class really is, even by its own standards, such as they are. And today's neoliberal government confirms my view as it rolls back the minimal advances achieved since 1945 with all its talk about 'free schools' and religious-based schooling and 'choice', back to the 19th century.

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An interesting essay by Carl Rowlands on the last book by economist GK Galbraith, [The Culture of Contentment](#) published in 1992, indirectly explains why a gutted education system is so crucial to the neoliberal model, not only because it simply doesn't need so many 'educated' people (having exported their jobs elsewhere and automated the rest) but perhaps more importantly, because of the role the education system plays in creating divisions within the working class to the advantage of the ruling elite.

Working strictly within the parameters of contentment as a 'people's party', New Labour, when it eventually emerged after the death of John Smith in 1994, openly sought to lead a revolt of the comfortable and personally ambitious. One of its central ideological demands was for 'improved' and increasingly

individualised delivery of those universal services from which the middle-class disproportionately benefits, to be delivered by a growing cohort of customer-focused private sector players. At the same time, New Labour bore down upon public services regarded as belonging to those on the fringes of public life, such as social security, local authority care homes and social work.

Galbraith correctly identified the blurring and melding together of corporate and public life. Much of corporate culture is highly bureaucratic, demanding passivity from its workforce to ensure compatibility with the hubristic exercise of managerial and executive power. This hubris, linked to 'bonus culture' and the excesses of financial capitalism, was to also become a hallmark of New Labour...Such a mode of governance is fundamentally corrosive of social solidarity. Ultimately, in a political culture of contentment, we will let those less fortunate than ourselves go to hell—just as most of us probably would, if we were working in an office or factory which faced restructuring. Our own position depends upon compliance with executive decisions. Resistance is left to the powerless and the occasional whistle-blower.

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[W]hile the most vulnerable have been hit hard, the existence of an underclass is entirely compatible with, and indeed necessary for, the continued operation of the culture of contentment. As Galbraith argues, our society is structured to allow large numbers of people not to be involved in the tough, repetitive manual work of the industrial era. These people are dependent on an effectively marginalised domestic minority to do the hard labour, as well as those working in developing countries. Such marginalisation can be overtly political, but it is perhaps most clearly reflected in the [extreme inequality that characterises the housing and labour markets](#). Those on the sharp end of these inequalities are blamed as the architects of their own misfortune and prescribed hard labour solutions, possibly in the form of workfare or highly-visible community service on the other; solutions from which the comfortable would naturally recoil. The threat of tough manual labour, in the form of work-camp prisons or workfare, lurks about the culture of contentment like the spectre at the feast. — [The Winter of Content](#) By Carl Rowlands.

What this amounts to is perhaps two-thirds of our population living comfortably (even if perhaps one-half of them now have a reduced level of 'contentment', but not enough to rock the boat) whilst one-third of the population (the marginalised minority) can, as Rowlands says, go to hell. Thus we hear the government talking about the 'work-shy' and that social welfare creates a 'culture of dependency' never mind those 'hardworking' upstanding 'traditional' families, the mythical 'middle England'. We have, in the space of a few short years, been catapulted back into the world of 19th century, Victorian capitalism, replete with all the pseudo-scientific explanations that rationalise why so many are poor.



It is within this reality, that what passes for a left in this country attempts to apply its outmoded and reformist vision. A vision that was already out-of-date over one hundred years ago when it was formulated. For the 'left' is just as much a part of the culture of contentment as those it claims to lead.

The title by the way, is a reference to the BBC sitcom, '[Are you being served](#)', set in an old-fashioned department store in London and full of stereotypes, some actually quite funny if you ignore the insults, including an ex-army officer, a raging queen, a blue rinse lady, and yer typical working class 'shirker', the dialogue chockablock full of double entendres. This is

capitalist culture as it presents the working class to itself.

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