

## British 'Fictions of Class' since 1945 – Revitalising *Class* in the Twenty-First Century

Workshop – University of Siegen, 18-19 June 2021

social class is at one and the same time a sociological idea, a political concept, a historical conjuncture, an activist slogan, yet a definition in terms of any one of these perspectives alone is bound to be unsatisfactory. We may go so far as to claim, indeed, that this is why the very form of the definition as such is unacceptable. Social class cannot be defined, it can only be provisionally approached in a kind of parallax, which locates it in the absent center of a multiple set of incompatible approaches.

Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Commentary on Volume One*, p. 7.

In their 2013 study *Class and Contemporary Britain*, Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn observe that “the last few years, and especially those following the global financial crisis, have seen social class, in all of its guises, return to the centre of cultural, political and media agendas” (18). Regardless of the new ambiguities and contradictions of class discourse today, it seems that discursive events such as the ‘Great British Class Survey’, Brexit, the Grenfell Tower Fire and the general elections of 2017 and 2019 have further disrupted the hegemony of the Post-Thatcherite discourse of classlessness in Britain. Certainly, contemporary British fiction is far from being classless. In fact, as Caroline Lusin has recently proposed, “since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Condition of England novel has reached a second peak after its Victorian heyday” (247). “Charting the repercussions of austerity, recent Condition of England novels”, Lusin observes, “are absorbed with the issues of class, social status, and, above all, money” (248). If class has indeed returned as political concept, activist slogan, sociological idea and literary preoccupation, we are perhaps at a critical historical conjuncture to reconsider the political-analytical work that class can do in literary and cultural studies concerned with British fiction.

While the place of class in the post-war fiction of the 1950s/1960s is still widely acknowledged, be it in ‘working’ or ‘middle-class’ writing, literary-critical narratives of the fate of class in British fiction published since the mid-1970s diverge significantly. In the 2000s, we find *inter alia* Dominic Head observing a “demise of class fiction”, with the exception of the 1990s “novel of underclass experience” (Head 246), while Lawrence Driscoll, much in line with Philip Tew, contrarily notes an “evasion” and a concurrent “return of class as a troubling subterranean and repressed element” in canonised ‘middle class’ novelists published between 1979 and 2007 (1). Also writing in the 2000s, Nick Bentley urges us to note that despite “immense cultural shifts” within the “old categories of class” since the 1950s, socio-economic differences “continue to have significant effect on the way British society is organized and the way people are represented in cultural terms” (9-10). In 2019, Bentley further noticed that “just at the moment when the literary treatment of class becomes crucial to understanding the profound cultural changes wrought first by Thatcherism and then New Labour, literary criticism turns away from an engagement with working-class writing to focus on other critical paradigms and concerns that were felt to be more pressing during the period, such as – in particular – ethnicity, ‘race’ and multiculturalism” (131). However, recent years have seen the publication of a range of works revitalising a literary-critical interest in class, most often with particular focus on working-class writing and/or settings, e.g. Roberto de Valle Alcalá’s *British Working-Class Fiction: Narratives of Refusal and the Struggle Against Work* (2016), *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice* (2018), edited by Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble, or Philip O’Brien’s *The Working Class and Twenty-First-Century British Fiction: Deindustrialisation, Demonisation, Resistance* (2019).

Building on these debates, we invite scholars working on British fiction published since 1945 to revisit ‘class fictions’ – whether ‘working’ or ‘middle’ class, canonical or marginal – and, with the benefit of hindsight, critically reevaluate the cultural/political significance of class in the novel and its analytical usefulness in literary criticism. We particularly invite presentations taking a wider historical purview, e.g. by comparing key texts published in different decades since 1945, in light of discursive shifts since the 2000s.

Papers may relate to (but are not limited to) the following broad topics:

- What **kinds of class narratives** emerge across
  - specific genres of literary fiction (e.g. condition of England novel, *Bildungsroman*, ‘crunch-lit’, Brexit novel etc.);
  - different modes of literary fiction, from realism to postmodernism and neo-modernism, in the gamut of the experimental/‘conventional’;
  - fictions received as working-class or middle-class writing? And, of course, what criteria are such classifications based on?
- What **meanings/discourses of class** do we bring to these texts and what meanings do these texts insinuate or question, ranging from
  - class as economic/social/cultural category related to the distribution of wealth/resources;
  - class as political-economic relationship, as symbolic distinction and domination;
  - class as collectivity, bounded group (related questions of agency and consciousness)?
- How can we approach **‘class’ and ‘class consciousness’** in fiction responding to specific historical conjunctures, such as
  - post-war affluence and consensus politics;
  - the entrenched industrial struggles of the 1970s;
  - the repression of unions, financialisation and deindustrialisation since the 1980s and
  - austerity in the 2000s?
- How can we theorise and analyse **class in relation to categories such as race and gender**? How far does the notion of intersectionality take us, and how do we relate it to the economic ‘base’ or effects of racialised and gendered inequalities?
- What further concepts pertaining to **potential collectivities and solidarities in class(ed) struggles** are helpful for literary criticism, e.g. collective enunciation (Deleuze/Guattari), chain of equivalence (Laclau/Mouffe), distribution of the sensible (Rancière), hegemonic bloc (Gramsci), etc.?

We welcome/invite proposals for 30-minute talks from researchers at all career stages and propose a discussion-oriented workshop format on the basis of pre-circulated drafts. Participants will be invited to submit their papers for consideration of publication in a special issue of *Anglistik* (23.1, 2023). Please send abstracts of 300 words and a short biographical note to Katrin Becker (Katrin.Becker@uni-siegen.de) by **15<sup>th</sup> September 2020**.

## Works Cited

- Bentley, Nick. *Contemporary British Fiction*. Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2008.
- . “Working-Class Writing and the Decline of Class Consciousness.” *British Literature in Transition, 1980-2000: Accelerated Times*, edited by Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene-Harwood, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 131-145.
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- O’Brien, Philip. *The Working Class and Twenty-First-Century British Fiction: Deindustrialisation, Demonisation, Resistance*. Routledge, 2019.