

Class Matters

Class Matters

Inequality and Exploitation
in Twenty-first Century Britain

Charles Umney

PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2018 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Charles Umney 2018

The right of Charles Umney to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3709 8	Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3708 1	Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0245 3	PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0247 7	Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0246 0	EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
The Rest of the Book	4
1. The ‘Economy that Works for Everyone’	5
Platitudes	5
Class Since the Financial Crisis	8
Class and Classification in Academia	17
2. Alien Powers: Class in Marxist Thought	22
Conflict in the Workplace	25
Dependency and Discipline	28
Subordination of the Individual	31
Alien Powers and Loss of Control	34
Beyond Production	37
3. Changing Class Dynamics in Britain	40
Introduction	40
Inequality and the Balance of Class Power in Britain	41
Financialisation, Capital and Class Discipline	53
Labour Discipline and ‘Precarity’	56
Conclusion	63
4. Jobs	65
Workplace Control	66
Conflict, Resistance and Class Power	81
5. Government	93
Adequate Forms and Alien Powers	96
Public Services and Capital	102
Blood Sacrifices to Alien Powers	112

6. Class and Equality	118
Class, 'Identity Politics' and Cosmopolitans	118
Marxism and Feminism	122
Equality and Capital	124
Capital and Immigration	130
7. Technology	136
The Means of Evaluation	140
Capitalism and the Wasting of Resources	144
8. Media and Ideology	148
Common Sense	148
The News Media	150
Marxist Views on Ideology	153
9. Conclusion	169
Summary	169
Capital and the Future	172
Final Thoughts: Britain after the 2017 General Election	176
<i>Notes</i>	182
<i>Index</i>	203

Introduction

Capitalism has been around for something like 500 years, and has held sway over for the vast majority of the earth for about 30. The reason this is worth pointing out is because, for many of its supporters, capitalism is far from perfect but it is the model that most fits with the reality of what human beings are actually like. A common argument goes as follows: humans are competitive, and some humans are much better than others (cleverer, harder-working and so on), and so a system which relies on competition and inequality, while it might seem a bit harsh, is basically appropriate. To try and do otherwise (i.e. build a system based on cooperation and equality) might be tempting but is ultimately utopian and thus doomed to fail.

But these kinds of argument, while posing as pragmatic, are also utopian in their own way. If capitalism really fits that well with human nature, then governments would not have to intervene so frequently and extensively to stop it falling apart. Anyway, as soon as we understand the comparatively short historical roots of capitalism, we are forced to recognise it for what it is: a system with a particular set of rules, among many others with different rules that have existed in the past, and which might exist in the future. Given that life on earth still has about five billion years left to run before the planet is engulfed in the sun's death cycle, it seems presumptuous to imagine that the system we have currently is the one that is best suited to the human condition.

The point of saying this is not to speculate about what the world might be like over the rainbow. It is simply to observe that, while we are in the middle of an era, it is very difficult to see beyond it. Various things about the world that appear second nature to those living within a specific system can start to appear very strange when looked at from a wider perspective. For example, in feudal Britain most people did not consider whether the belief in the king's right to rule being bestowed directly by God would appear ridiculous from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. Likewise, it is possible that, in centuries to come, people may also see something ridiculous in a system whereby supermarkets load their shelves with completely unnecessary quantities

of food that gets thrown in the bin at the end of the day, while some people struggle to afford proper nutrition. So this book is, in part, an attempt to make life under twenty-first-century British capitalism look strange.

One of its strangest elements is the question of class. Most people do not particularly want a society divided along class lines. But rather than do anything about this, people tend to invent ideas (e.g. ‘meritocracy’, ‘social mobility’) that make it seem a bit less offensive. Hence, it is often argued that the ideal society should be one of ‘equal opportunity’, where every individual succeeds or fails on their own merits. This way, we would still have a class-divided society, but at least we would know that the people at the bottom truly deserved to be there.

Until recently, people that talked too much about class were considered to be dinosaurs from the age when poor children toiled day and night, losing their fingers amid the power looms of northern England in order to avoid the workhouse. The mainstream centre-left in Britain, supposedly sympathetic to working-class concerns, swallowed this argument whole, and it was elevated to one of the central dogmas of British politics from the 1990s until about 2015. But now this line looks very dated. Instead, the fashionable thing to say about class is not that it doesn’t matter, but that the way in which it matters is changing. Nobody really disputes that, for instance, the ‘Brexit’ referendum of 2016 revealed substantial differences in the worldviews and aspirations of people from different socio-economic backgrounds, though how to interpret this is more controversial.

Initially, the re-emergence of class was driven by conservative voices. There is a powerful story that can be told about British politics (and indeed politics in any number of countries), about the divide between cosmopolitan elitists who love globalisation, and the ordinary people who are menaced by it. People on the right have been very good at playing on this idea, and they have, at times, used it to make discussion of class almost inseparable from neuroses surrounding nationalism and immigration. After assuming power, Theresa May tried to embody this worldview, though not very persuasively. But however bad things became for her, they were much worse for the centre-left,* who found themselves rendered irrelevant by their failure to find their own way of addressing

* By which I mean your Blairs, Browns, Milibands, etc.

the topic of class that didn't involve either empty platitudes or borrowed nationalism.

The reason British politics has suddenly become interesting is because we have the opportunity to see whether a more radical version of the left can do any better. Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party throughout 2017 was highly successful: to understand that this is the case, you need to compare its results not with previous election victories such as 1997, which might as well be 200 years ago given how much has changed since then, but with what is happening to equivalent parties in other countries in 2017. In France, Germany, the Netherlands, Greece, even in the US, established parties of the mainstream left look increasingly weak and directionless. In the UK, by contrast, following the 2017 general election there was actual enthusiasm and optimism.

Many people argue, however, that the current progress of the Labour Party was mainly based on its resonance with idealistic (and comparatively highly educated) young people offended by Brexit, rather than any kind of reconnection with the 'working class'. The fact that they gained ground in places like Kensington and Canterbury while losing it in places like Sunderland provided some symbolic support for this idea. Indeed, for some, after briefly starting to matter again after Theresa May's 2016 conference speech (where she really did talk about class a lot), class is now once again being replaced, this time by age, as the most important divide in British politics.

Ultimately, the problem is that the way class is invoked in British politics is usually inconsistent, shallow and self-serving. It obviously matters, but we need to find better ways of understanding it. That is the point of this book. In it, I look to revitalise a very different way of thinking about class which is barely recognised today, and which is rooted in a Marxist analysis of the relationship between *labour* and *capital*. Looked at this way, class can help us to understand why, for instance, young people (even those from affluent and educated backgrounds) might be increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo in this country, to an extent which cannot be even remotely understood by crude divisions of people into socio-economic categories defined by letter classifications (e.g. A, B, C1, C2, D, E). Understanding what labour and capital are, and why the relationship between them matters, enables not just a vague and moralistic rhetoric about elites versus everyone else, but also sheds light on the wider workings of the British economy, government and society.

THE REST OF THE BOOK

I will continue as follows. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of the ways in which the concept of class has been used and abused in Britain in recent years, taking in both political jargon and academic research. In Chapter 2, I discuss the Marxist view of class, showing how it differs from the ideas discussed in Chapter 1 and identifying what I see as its most important elements. In Chapter 3, I provide a general overview of the way the British economy has changed in recent decades, with a particular focus on the way in which the 'balance of power' between labour and capital has shifted in favour of the latter. I argue that the Marxist ideas explained in Chapter 2 are important for understanding these general trends.

After this, the second half of the book engages with a series of specific topics such as work, technology and government, arguing that, in each case, Marxist theories about class are important and helpful in allowing us to understand them better. In particular, it helps us to explain how and why these things take the (often strange) form that they do in our society, as well as the ways in which they may be evolving. Firstly, I look at work: the place around which millions of people's lives revolve. I use insights gained from my analysis of class to consider why the experience of being a worker is, for so many, one of exploitation, alienation, frustration or boredom. Next, I examine government, making the argument that, in numerous fundamental respects, British political institutions are inevitably structured by the need to help capital at the expense of labour. This discussion of government carries over into Chapter 6, where I present a more in-depth discussion of the political context as it relates specifically to 'equalities' issues, with particular attention paid to gender and immigration. In Chapters 7 and 8, I consider how class relationships impact the evolution of new technology and the role of the media respectively. Finally, at the end of Chapter 8 I return to the British political scene and consider what the book's analysis tells us about its possible futures.

1

The 'Economy that Works for Everyone'

PLATITUDES

I will govern for the whole United Kingdom and we will look to build an economy that works for everyone, not just the privileged few.

Theresa May, after becoming prime minister of the United Kingdom, July 2016

We want to see a break with the failed economic orthodoxy that has gripped policymakers for a generation, and set out a very clear vision for a Labour government that will create an economy that works for all not just the few.

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party, May 2016

Class is a communist concept ... it groups people together and sets them against each other.

Margaret Thatcher, 1992¹

Very few people claim they want an economy that only works for some. Given this, we might wonder why senior politicians keep talking about how they want an economy that works for everyone. If everyone agrees on this, why keep bringing it up as if it were controversial?

The idea of the economy that 'works for everyone' is a platitude. It is something that is sufficiently vague that nobody could really disagree, and which nobody ever gets around to defining. British politics runs on these kinds of statements. Certain things are so roundly accepted as good that their actual meaning is rarely questioned: important platitudes of the last decade have included 'balancing the budget' and 'social mobility'. More recently, these have been usurped by 'taking back control' and, as things have become more and more chaotic, 'certainty' and 'stability' (these last ones looking more grimly ironic by the day). These are all empty phrases

on to which listeners can impute anything they like. Conversely, there are other phrases with equally little definition that are used to signify Bad Things: ‘red tape’, ‘Westminster elites’, ‘magic money tree’ and so on.

The platitude of the economy that works for everyone is a particularly important one, because of the sense of fuzzy warmth it provides. It conveys the idea that British society could and should be one big harmonious unit, where the prosperity of one means the prosperity of all, so long as a few issues can be ironed out. As with a healthy human body after the removal of an inflamed appendix, once a specific problem has been dealt with, the remaining entity is basically one in which all the different bits act in harmony. This is a good, uplifting message.

But such an economy has evidently not arrived and seems unlikely to do so in the imminent future. So the business of politics becomes the business of identifying new problems that can explain the delay, and this is where the message becomes less inspirational. There is no shortage of groups or entities that act as the social equivalent of the inflamed appendix, and politicians have competed to find the most relevant ones. On this basis, in the years following the financial crisis of 2008, the political right clearly did much better: migrants, the European Union, the unemployed and benefits claimants* evidently captured voters’ imagination more than left-wing concerns like inequality, ‘the bankers’ and ‘irresponsible capitalists’.² There has been a shifting astrology of blame which has, at times, become surreal and dreamlike, even extending at one point to people who don’t have alarm clocks[†] or who leave their blinds closed.³ Sure signs of unacceptable sloth.

The idea of class poses a problem for these kinds of platitudes, because it suggests that there are more deep-rooted and intractable divisions in society that cannot be resolved without significant upheaval – hence Margaret Thatcher’s rejection of the very concept, in the quote above, as one imported from communist ideology. It alludes to tensions that are imprinted on the heart of society and *define the way it works*, when actually it is much easier to parcel out smaller, more manageable evils, whether they are real or not. So it seemed, until quite recently, that class had become very unwelcome in mainstream political discussion.

* Benefits claimants are a vastly larger group than the unemployed, but these two groups are often referred to as if they are synonymous.

† In early 2011, Nick Clegg tried hard to popularise the phrase ‘Alarm Clock Britain’ as a (wholly unsuccessful) means of signifying the kinds of no-nonsense hard workers he wanted to identify with the Liberal Democrats.

The Labour Party had a big hand in this. In its New Labour period, it had a quaintly uplifting message: yes, class *used* to matter and it used to be terrible, back in the pre-war era when people worked in hellish factory conditions. But now we've had Labour governments, along with the National Health Service (NHS), the welfare state, workers' rights, and so on, and as a result class is not a problem anymore. It still exists, but if we can make sure we have 'equality of opportunity' (as if this is possible when people start life under such different conditions) then class divisions don't have to be divisive.

Since then the Labour Party's abandonment of class has come back to haunt it. The political right in Britain became far keener to talk about class than before. Politicians such as Theresa May and Nigel Farage sought to build a close association between the idea of the 'working class' and a particular set of opinions, most notably related to immigration. They cultivated a widespread conventional wisdom that 'ordinary people' were sick of immigration and the EU, while 'liberal elites' loved immigration and hated native British people. This message, while dependent on some fairly self-serving stereotypes, proved quite resonant, and did the Labour Party very severe damage, particularly in the general election defeat of 2015 and in the Brexit referendum, which led to huge internal tensions and agonising. In 2017, as May began to look increasingly weak and Labour appeared to be gaining ground under Corbyn, the issue of class once again became hazy in British politics. For instance, we were told that age is now a far more important division than class, and had largely usurped the latter as a means of explaining people's voting choices.⁴

This erratic and unfocused discussion of class, sometimes dismissive, usually vague, always self-serving, comes about mainly because the concept is nowadays generally understood as a kind of cultural identification. It is associated with certain accents or certain kinds of job, or the kinds of music or TV programmes people like; who their friends are, the values they emphasise and the kinds of newspapers they read. Consequently, some of the people who talk about class most often are self-conscious liberal broadsheet journalists, fretting over whether or not they are allowed to pass judgement on people who read *The Sun*. There is a vast body of academic research on how to categorise people into different classes according to these social and cultural differences. I will summarise some of this later.

While recognising the insights that some of this literature can provide, I want to get away from this kind of thing. In the Marxist reading, class is about something different. It is not, at root, about culture, but about the *position people occupy within the structure of an economy*, including the economic function they fulfil and the demands and imperatives they face as a result. Some people own businesses and invest money in them in order to make a profit. Other people depend on their ability to sell their time and skills in exchange for a wage. Some have managerial roles whereby they need to control and regulate the second group in the interests of the first, while others might be involved in moving money about, or maintaining social order. Often, the interests of people in these different positions conflict.

The basic argument here is that these economic roles matter more than cultural or social identifiers: they are the building blocks of the capitalist economy, and the differences and conflicting interests between them not only affect people's experiences and the pressures they face in their own lives, but also have much bigger implications for wider society and government. So class is not just about classification: if we look at the most important changes in British political economy since the 1970s (which I will consider in Chapter 3), we can see that these changes did not just *affect* class relationships, but they were also *affected by* them. Before getting on to this, however, I will look in more depth at how discussion around class has developed in Britain over the last decade.

CLASS SINCE THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

Britain, like many other countries, had a brief glimpse of what we might call 'class consciousness' following the financial crisis of 2008. The financial sector was identified as the main cause of the downturn, and for a while the phrase 'the bankers' became closely associated with various adjectives: greed, trickery, short-sightedness. There was a consensus that large financial institutions had taken on too much risk in order to make more money for themselves, and that everyone else was facing the consequences.

On the surface this seems like a fertile context for class conflict. There was, certainly, a lot of protest, and groups on the radical left momentarily seemed marginally more relevant than they had done for years. Most notable here was the Occupy movement, which began in the US and spread to various other countries. Occupy groups gained publicity by

staging highly visible protests in centres of financial activity, including outside St Paul's Cathedral. They set up tents and stayed there for several months, holding debates, making banners and so on.

These movements were highly successful in some respects. Mainly, they got people talking about the things they thought were important. The use of words and phrases such as 'inequality' or 'corporate greed' in the media spiked following their protests, and declined again as Occupy's profile diminished.⁵

But to what extent was Occupy about class? It aimed itself at bankers and the politicians with whom they were presumed to be in cahoots. They argued that these people had stitched the system up and had become extremely rich at everyone else's expense. They had a slogan to this effect: 'the 1 per cent versus the 99 per cent'. The problem with this slogan is that it is vague. For one thing, it relies on the conspiratorial idea that society is governed by a tiny elite out for themselves, as opposed to a chaotic society in which elites are as confused as everyone else. With the benefit of hindsight, which of these seems to work better as a description of the Cameron–Clegg years? Or the minority Conservative Brexit government? Capitalist economies are more confusing and unpredictable than this.

The slogan also buys into the 'economy that works for everyone' platitude. There is this tiny group who need to be brought down a peg or several, but beyond that everyone else exists on the side of righteousness. Lumped into the 99 per cent are everyone from students, the homeless, professional and blue-collar employees, the unemployed, the retired, small businesses and, implicitly, large businesses that work in 'good' areas like manufacturing rather than duplicitous financiers with their hocus pocus.

This 'intuitive populism'⁶ was its main selling point, directed at a '1 per cent' which is highly opaque but found colourful personification in the actions of particular individuals, such as the former Royal Bank of Scotland boss Fred Goodwin. Very obvious, unambiguous bad guys, who made it easy to parcel off a small niche of society as the villains who were ruining it for everyone else. If this is class politics, it is a very narrow and personalised version.

Occupy deserves credit for pressuring British politicians, even Conservative ones, to talk a lot more than they used to about inequality and corporate greed. But these terms are fuzzy. Fighting against inequality, for instance, has long been a rallying cry of the left, but the word 'inequality'

is surprisingly easily subsumed into dry and technocratic language. What is inequality, really? Often, it is encapsulated in an esoterically calculated figure (i.e. the Gini coefficient) that sometimes gets higher (which is bad) or lower (which is good), and which can be manhandled in support of any argument. For example, Britain's Gini coefficient may well decline if economic instability takes a chunk out of elite incomes, as occurred in 2010–11,⁷ but this does not mean that anything particularly profound or emancipatory has happened.

The danger of this technocratic fuzziness is that the left's rhetoric fizzles out, and this is indeed what happened in the years immediately after the crisis. David Cameron, the prime minister at the time of Occupy's activity, was able to reel off his own statistics that said inequality was falling, enabling every potentially damaging exchange on the topic to disperse into a fog of numbers. Politicians on the centre-left were repeatedly naive about how widely the anti-inequality message would resonate. Concern with inequality is not a new thing in Britain: the number of British people who think that the gap between rich and poor is too wide has been very high for years and looks like remaining so. But what declined throughout the 1990s and 2000s was people's inclination to actually do anything about it. By 2010, the number of people supporting policies that redistribute wealth had sunk to about one in three, compared to over half in 1991.⁸ The effect of several years of austerity and high-profile attacks on welfare recipients (such as the harshly punitive 'bedroom tax') did not have a substantial effect on this general lack of interest.⁹ Corbyn's strategy relied on the idea that people were starting to care again, but this cannot be assumed.

So while the old (pre-2015) centre-left put too much faith in people's outrage at inequality, the right were highly adept at finding a narrative which was in many respects less accurate (the idea that the financial crisis was a result of Gordon Brown 'spending all the money' on benefits claimants) but, paradoxically, felt more real. They realised that very few people identified as 'the 99 per cent'. Instead, they pursued a strategy of flattery. David Cameron and George Osborne developed a category that people actually *wanted* to feel like they were part of. This was the idea of 'hardworking people', and it was given its appeal by the sense, reinforced by government, that there were a lot of lazy people about. Everyone knows a lazy person with whom they like to contrast themselves.

The hardworking person became the model citizen of the austerity era: they accepted that we were 'all in it together', and that you had to