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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

pull your weight by making sacrifices without complaining. This idea was fleshed out in sometimes poetic ways. The hardworking person was enraged by the sight of their neighbours' curtains being drawn (George Osborne talking on the radio: 'It is unfair that people listening to this programme going out to work see the neighbour next door with the blinds down because they are on benefits'). They were cruelly bullied by trade unions, who admittedly are also made up of hard workers, but of the kind that complain (Sajid Javid: 'these [anti-union] reforms will stop the "endless" threat of strike action hanging over hardworking people'). And their main interests were gambling and alcohol.*

In policy terms, Cameron and Osborne's legacy now looks very humble indeed. They fell a long way short of their self-imposed deficit-reduction targets. Indeed, their whole rhetoric and agenda was built around eliminating the UK budget deficit by 2020, but this objective was ditched as counterproductive and unachievable by their successors, Theresa May and Phillip Hammond. They advertised themselves as the only choice for 'stable' leadership, but then Cameron had to resign after accidentally leaving the European Union. Nonetheless, they cemented a highly successful political demonology for the early twenty-first century. The economy that works for everyone is possible, if by 'everyone' we mean 'hardworking people'. They flattered enough people into identifying with this category to win elections, and were very pointed in showing who did not fit. Consider how the role of the unemployed moved from victim to perpetrator in Conservative election posters, from Thatcher's first election (an image of people queuing outside an unemployment office with the headline 'Labour's not working') to Cameron's 2015 re-election (a picture of David Cameron with sleeves rolled up so as to look energetic, with the headline 'let's cut benefits for those that refuse work').†

This was a far more (electorally) effective variant on the 'economy that works for everyone' line than the Occupy vision (and even more so than the weak dilution thereof upon which Ed Miliband ran the 2015 election). In the latter case, the barrier to a good economy was a

* In 2014 Grant Shapps (then Tory chairman) tweeted a celebratory image in response to the latest Osborne budget reading thus: 'BINGO! Cutting the bingo tax and beer duty to help hardworking people do more of the things they enjoy.'

† The value of comparing these two posters was inspired by Imogen Tyler's keynote speech at the *Work, Employment and Society* conference at the University of Leeds, September 2016.

highly opaque and hard-to-define group that many people ultimately suspected were untouchable anyway. The hardworking people phrase, by contrast, enabled the Conservatives to present themselves as the improbable conquerors of Labour's territory. Until very recently, Labour itself accepted their narrative (and many people in the party clearly still do). As the then shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Rachel Reeves underlined, Labour had become desperate to show that 'we are not the party of people on benefits. We don't want to be seen, and we're not, the party to represent those who are out of work ... Labour are a party of working people, formed for and by working people.'¹⁰ Here, the glib division between the 'working class' and those who are out of work is taken as read. As I will argue later, according to the Marxist view this is one of the most stupid things anyone can possibly say about class.

During Theresa May's first few months in office, the Conservative version of class warfare assumed a fuller expression. A Conservative MP hoped, in a French newspaper, that May might be the first politician of the new 'post-liberal' settlement,¹¹ being unafraid to recognise that many people's lives have been much damaged by social and economic liberalism. On assuming her position, May gave a speech in which she repeatedly used the phrase 'working class' and put strong emphasis on themes of social and economic justice. For example, she talked about

fighting against the burning injustice that, if you're born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others ...

If you're from an ordinary working class family, life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise. You have a job but you don't always have job security. You have your own home, but you worry about paying a mortgage. You can just about manage but you worry about the cost of living and getting your kids into a good school ...

I know you're working around the clock, I know you're doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle. The government I lead will be driven not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours.

Why did this approach fail for her? Probably not because it is a weak line: it isn't (as evidenced by the pressure which mounted on Corbyn throughout 2017 to say more right-wing-sounding things about immigration, and the number of people in the Corbyn movement who share a similar critique of liberalism). More likely, she just expressed it in an

implausible way – you can't say these things and then lecture nurses on live TV about how naive they are to ask for a pay rise.

The most interesting thing for our purposes is what right-wing people mean when they talk about the 'working class'. At her first party conference, May was using this language, sometimes in a self-contradictory way. She wanted to create 'a programme for government to act to create an economy that works for everyone – an economy that's on the side of ordinary working class people'. The first half of the quote is the platitude we have encountered many times already. The second half, though, seems to define a specific group within society and explicitly put government in its corner – so, by definition, *not* an economy that works for *everyone* – what about the liberal elites? It is, in its fuzzy and self-serving way, a message of class conflict.

This kind of language built on the way Cameron and Osborne were implicitly using the idea of class. By 'working class' in the above quote, May essentially means the same thing as Cameron's 'hardworking people': a kind of fuzzy-but-warm haze that almost everyone thinks they are a part of. But she was drawing out a particular element of this far more strongly than before. In passages like the following, the meaning becomes much sharper:

[I want] to put the power of government squarely at the service of ordinary working-class people. Because too often that isn't how it works today. Just listen to the way a lot of politicians and commentators talk about the public. They find your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal, your attachment to your job security inconvenient. They find the fact that more than seventeen million voters decided to leave the European Union simply bewildering.

Here, various things are meshed together. There is a concern about job security lifted from the trade union movement and the political left. It is true that this has been threatened by 'liberal elites'; May was aware of just how much this is the case, having been an integral part of these efforts in the Cameron government. Then there is the old-school Tory stuff: the EU, patriotism, law and order, and so on. These themes are presented as if they are all part of the same big basket of Working-Class Issues. So the working class is defined as people who worry about job security, who love the Queen, who want the death penalty and who want

to leave the EU. And, of course, who dislike immigration. May was the most anti-immigrant British prime minister for a very long time, with a tendency to make sure that anti-immigration sentiment remained high-up on the list of working-class issues as she defined them. So her key line was probably this one: ‘if you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what the very word “citizenship” means.’

This is a very important quote. Here, the elite opponents of the working class are *cosmopolitans*. In other words, people that revel in a world of open borders and diversity; put succinctly by the musician Wynton Marsalis as meaning that ‘you fit in wherever you go’.¹² It is obvious that many people have lost some very important things because of globalisation: international competition and economic restructuring (most importantly the decline of heavy industry in Britain) have rendered working lives in many regions insecure, and caused the fragmentation of communities that once had more cohesive identities and senses of purpose. Employers and investors are highly mobile, and their decisions to move elsewhere has serious consequences for those that depend on them for work. So, unsurprisingly, many people do not want to fit in wherever they go, and may distrust things that do. It is easy to see why, in this context, it has been an open goal for the Conservatives to conflate support for migration and free movement in the EU with anti-working-class elitism. It is also worth noting that the most cosmopolitan thing in the world is capital, but we will return to this later.

This caused serious problems for Labour, and will keep resurfacing irrespective of periods of electoral optimism. It is supposed to be ‘the party of the working class’, but the associations that go with this term have, as we have just seen, been changing in a way that is much more conducive to Conservative talking points. In some quarters, it seems that the phrase ‘working class’ has become largely synonymous with criticism of immigration. It has become unusual to find a politician or journalist who uses this term without then segueing into this topic. For instance, *The Sun*, which always used to complain about class politics, now features leader columns with titles like ‘Rage of the Working Class’. But what is the working class raging about? Only one thing, apparently:

Our population has just rocketed by 513,273 in one year, 335,600 from migration. It is not racist to protest at the calamitous effect this is having on working people who bear the brunt of it.

Prosperous middle class home owners in London love all the Polish plumbers and cleaners. For working people the influx has meant low pay, stagnant for a decade as housing costs have soared. It means schools and surgeries are full up.

It means being branded 'thick' by supposedly educated Remain supporters too dim themselves to see that the rational desire for our Government to control immigration has nothing – zero – to do with prejudice or narrow-mindedness.¹³

Obviously, we are not just talking about a British phenomenon here. The tying together of this kind of 'identity politics' and the working class has fatally undermined centre-left parties in many countries. This is perhaps most obvious in the United States, where Donald Trump worked hard to befriend the leaders of predominantly white trade unions (notably in the building trades, whom he will need for his border wall) while preparing for conflict with those more likely to represent immigrant workers and ethnic minorities (e.g. in the public sector).¹⁴

But despite all this, the UK Labour Party actually performed surprisingly well in the 2017 elections compared to sister parties in other European countries such as France, Greece, Spain, Iceland or the Netherlands. This resilience coincided with a strong shift to the left under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, a fact which caused much surprise and worry among commentators wedded to liberal political orthodoxy.

How did this happen? At first, it seemed like Corbyn would not manage to reverse Labour's downward spiral. In the initial stages of his leadership, he appeared more afraid of talking about class than the Conservatives. In his 2016 conference leader's speech, a week before May's, Corbyn did not use the phrase 'working class' at all. He used the woollier term 'working families'. The success of what we might call the 'Conservative class warrior' as described above was one reason why Labour preferred to keep things vague, relying on broader condemnations of inequality and reiterations of the 'economy that works for everyone' platitude. It was unnerved by the rawer kind of class conflict expounded by the Tories which centred on nationalism. Labour appeared snookered, prompting various doom-laden prophecies from even the most sympathetic observers.¹⁵ Brexit brought these anxieties to almost intolerable levels for Labour and was the central cause of a failed leadership coup in 2016.

The situation became much brighter with the general election of 2017, which left Labour in an unexpectedly strong position having attracted more votes than most commentators, and most of their own MPs, had thought possible. Suddenly, doom-mongers became optimism-mongers.¹⁶ But it is wrong to imagine that Labour's agonising around class has been resolved: almost certainly, it will come back. Their most high-profile constituency triumphs in 2017 came in places like Kensington where they attracted new support from anti-Brexit rich people, or in places with a heavy student vote like Canterbury. Meanwhile, there were swings *away* from the party in places like Sunderland which had voted very strongly for Brexit. The fact that the biggest sources of new Labour support were among the young and the highly educated¹⁷ suggests, at least on the face of things, that Labour remains highly vulnerable to the 'right-wing class warrior' argument.

On the other hand, the face of things can be deceiving. The argument of this book will be that a lot of the discussion and analysis mentioned so far is based on very shallow readings of class, which sees it as a means of sorting people into categories, rather than something which in many respects *defines the way in which society works*. Let us take a stereotypical Corbyn-supporting educated young person working in a graduate job. (By 'young person', we shouldn't imagine a teenager: Labour support was higher in each age band up to those in their forties). Their voting choice *may* tell us that Labour had simply realigned to Hoover up a more privileged demographic, thus moving away from their 'working-class base'. But it may also tell us something else: perhaps the problems that used to be associated with this 'working-class base' are now starting to spread across society more widely. Insecurity, the boredom and frustration of working life, the sense that government is powerless to act to address urgent and distressing social problems because it needs to avoid offending 'the markets': these are all 'class issues' and they affect a very wide spectrum of people indeed.

The point is that we need, urgently, to consider how we understand the idea of class. Class is clearly important in Britain today. As we have seen, it has become a fashionable topic for some surprising people, and the source of terrible worry for others. But the way in which the term is used and understood has been manipulated in a political and self-serving manner. In some ways it appears to be almost worthlessly vague, such as when it is associated with 'hardworking people'. At other times, it becomes darkly and misleadingly specific, as in the conflation of

'working class' with anti-immigrant sentiment. In trying to get beyond this, I will start by looking at some other, more academic, discussions around class in twenty-first century Britain.

CLASS AND CLASSIFICATION IN ACADEMIA

Phillip Mirowski has argued that since the 1970s there has been a concerted effort by politicians to designate more and more people as 'middle class'.¹⁸ This, he suggests, is a good way of minimising social conflict, since if everyone feels middle class they presumably have more invested in the status quo. The previous section, however, showed a slightly different picture emerging in relation to current British politics, whereby politicians allude much more frequently, and in a more celebratory way, to the 'working class', all the while associating it strongly with nationalism and patriotism. But what about when we move away from front-line politics?

There are various academic writers who have sought to rehabilitate class as a key focus when analysing society. Probably the most high-profile recent work is *Social Class in the 21st Century* by Mike Savage (written with several colleagues at the London School of Economics). This book was informed by a large piece of research called the 'Great British Class Survey', conducted in conjunction with the BBC. People were asked to fill in an online questionnaire about their earnings, job and living situation, as well as various questions about their social networks – the kinds of people they know and socialise with. The survey then assigned respondents to one of seven categories, which they identified as the new class structure in Britain. These are the elite, the 'established middle class', the 'technical middle class', the 'new affluent worker', the 'traditional working class', 'emerging service workers' and the 'precariat'.

In developing this sort of categorisation, Savage is seeking to do various things. First, he wants to offer a more nuanced hierarchy, moving beyond the vague terminology of 'working' and 'middle' classes. In this sense, the book is about classification: he argues that we need to be able to delineate people's class positions accurately, and then understand the characteristics of each category. This, he suggests, also serves an important political purpose. It helps us to empathise more successfully with those at the bottom of society, and to be more critical of the unfair advantages accruing to those at the top. For this reason, the first paragraph of Savage's book puts emphasis not on class itself but

inequality. Ultimately, it is claimed, understanding class helps us fight inequality.

Another of Savage's objectives relates to the idea of 'social mobility', which is rarely far behind when the issue of inequality is raised. Social mobility is when someone born into a poor family has plenty of opportunities to make it up the social scale, and presumably when people from affluent backgrounds see their life prospects decline (though the latter point is rarely as celebrated by those who have turned social mobility into a catchphrase). Savage says that these class distinctions are an important barrier to social mobility. If you're born in the elite, you have friends and contacts who are also in the elite, and you know how to conduct yourself in a way that other members of the elite like, so you tend to stay in the elite.

Third, to make this social mobility argument, Savage highlights different kinds of 'capital' – meaning attributes that someone possesses or develops which they can use to enhance their class position. These are: economic capital (referring to someone's wealth and income), cultural capital (their tastes and preferences) and social capital (their friends and social networks). People who have a lot of these kinds of capital tend to use them to get more and climb higher, thus breaking social mobility and reinforcing class divisions.

In this sense, Savage is highly influenced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who pioneered the use of 'capital' in this way. Bourdieu argued that vast portions of our lives and societies are shaped by different classes' access to these kinds of capital. People from more affluent class backgrounds have certain kinds of interests, certain contact networks, certain senses of humour and certain ways of expressing themselves, and this is not even to mention the additional advantages that being born with money can buy (better education, more secure living conditions and so on). He used the idea of 'symbolic violence': the things that more affluent people like are held up as the most important things needed to get ahead in society, whereas the things working-class people like and the way they behave are presented as what not to do. The fact that a certain set of mannerisms and cultural reference points get you much easier access to influential social networks, for instance, is a kind of 'symbolic violence'.

Bourdieu is celebrated for giving a rich depiction of the lives of people in different class situations, and, in particular, showing how these distinctions reproduce themselves from generation to generation.¹⁹ Ultimately,

Bourdieu provides a very good way of explaining why social inequalities do not change, and why there is little social mobility. Bourdieu's work, as shown by its influence on writers such as Savage, is probably the dominant way of addressing class in academic sociology; it's an exercise in classification, characterising the nature of differences and showing why they don't go away. As I have already noted, after the 2017 election there was a popular argument that age had replaced class as the most important factor influencing voting choice.²⁰ This is interesting. If our concern is mainly about defining a set of classes and showing why the differences between them matter, this development poses a problem: why bother, when it seems that age is more important in explaining people's worldviews anyway? I will come back to this in the final section of the book, where I consider the situation in Britain following the 2017 general election.

Notice that the bottom of Savage's scale is something called 'the precariat',* which is drawn from the work of Guy Standing, another academic with fairly high media visibility and a flair for coining neologisms.²¹ Standing has become a very influential writer on class, because he posits the existence of an entirely new class, and a 'dangerous one' into the bargain.† The precariat, for Standing, is a diverse group, with the defining feature being *insecurity*. For instance:

1. Their 'industrial citizenship' is insecure. By this, Standing means that they have little security in the world of work. They will lack legal or institutional protection against job loss, work opportunities may be short term and prone to dry up, they will have little access to opportunities to gain skills that could enable them to access better jobs; and they will generally have nobody to speak up for them at work (such as trade unions).
2. They will also have income insecurity, and will likely not know whether they will be able to provide for themselves and their dependents in the medium term. This is partly a natural result of point one, but also reflects various other things: the weakening of welfare 'safety nets', for instance. People in the precariat are also less likely to have family or community networks they can draw on for support. In this sense, the precariat is connected with the idea of

* This is a portmanteau, mixing together the words 'proletariat' and 'precarious'.

† The subtitle of his book *The Precariat* is 'the new dangerous class'.

- ‘disaffiliation’, which French sociologists have been writing about for some years:²² ‘disaffiliated’ people, like the precariat, are cut off from access to both secure work and other sources of support and income provided by wider society.
3. They also, apparently, do not *feel* like part of the ‘traditional working class’. They do not identify with trade unions, the traditional representatives of this group, and they do not necessarily value the same things the post-war trade union movement valued (such as wage growth and job security). Instead, they might demand other kinds of social protection; things like a ‘universal basic income’, for instance (we return to this idea later).

Point three – that the precariat has completely different needs and aspirations from the ‘traditional working class’ – is probably Standing’s most controversial point, and he is often criticised for not providing enough evidence. Expressed this way, the question becomes not simply ‘how do we define different classes?’ but also ‘what do different classes want?’ In this sense Standing is no doubt unsurprised by the tying together of class and attitudes towards immigration described in the previous section. For him, one of the dangers of ‘precarity’ is how easily it can be associated with nationalist political projects: insecurity becomes the rejection of globalisation which becomes the rejection of foreigners. Hence, if nothing more positive can be offered to them, in the worst-case scenario he sees the precariat as the core demographic of future fascist movements.

So the state of the art in academic discussion of class tends to emphasise the need for finer distinctions, taking into account the relative decline of ‘traditional working-class’ jobs and the growth in white-collar or service work. It also emphasises *barriers* between classes, examining how class distinctions (e.g. in access to different kinds of social, economic and cultural capital) reinforce and reproduce themselves, acting as a brake on social mobility. There is also a growing concern with insecurity among those at the bottom, as exemplified by Standing’s work on the precariat.

One thinker who does not feature heavily in the work of high-profile British academic analysts of class such as Savage or Standing is Marx. To some extent Marx is seen as too blunt. After all, he focused primarily on the relationship between only two groups – worker and capitalist – whereas nowadays we want to see more nuance. The kind of economy he was analysing (principally Britain in the nineteenth century) was one where mechanised industry was just emerging, and in which the new

actors on the scene were the emerging 'proletariat' of factory workers and the 'bourgeois' mill owner. But the UK economy is highly complex, featuring huge amounts of professional, knowledge-based and service-based work, which obviously presents a challenge for this kind of binary distinction.

Another reason why Marx appears at odds with the spirit of the age is that he has very little interest in 'social mobility', at least in the warm and fuzzy way we understand it today. Who could deny that people should be able to rise in the social hierarchy if they have good ideas and work hard? As we shall see, Marx does talk a lot about social mobility in a sense, but in a way that inspires less enthusiasm: he looks in some depth at the *downwards* social mobility of people who may have once been self-sufficient small producers, but who were reduced to the status of disposable factory hands by the development of capitalist industry.

It is true, then, that if our main purpose is to find increasingly fine ways of categorising different groups of people, and explaining the barriers between them, Marx's writing offers little help today. But thinking about class should not be purely about classification, however nuanced, as an end in itself. As I said earlier, for Marx class is more about the position and function that people occupy within the structure of an economy, and the way in which these different roles interact and conflict. For instance, someone who depends on selling their time and skills in exchange for a wage may have conflicting interests with someone who depends on making a profit by manufacturing and selling goods at a competitive price. This is the case even if they both have the same views on the relative value of the opera versus *The X Factor*, have the same accents and went to the same school.

The key point is this: when talking about class, our objective should not be simply to provide a comprehensive categorisation of groups of people and the differences between them, but *to consider how the interactions between people with different economic roles affects the working of society as a whole*, from the experiences people have at work, to the development and application of technology, to the economic and social policies pursued by governments. Unlike Bourdieu or Savage, whose emphasis is on how class divisions persist, Marx's interest is on how the conflict between different classes leads society to *change*, and hence to the undermining and disruption of the status quo rather than its preservation.