

# 7 Class and class struggle

## Class and popular culture

In a book on cultural theory and popular culture why concern ourselves with social class? One answer is to say that class has always been a concern of this book; what has changed is that it now has its own chapter. Another is to say that although it is an 'economic' category, it is always lived culturally and one of the places where we recognize its existence is popular culture. Put simply, popular culture is a key site for the recognition and self-recognition of class. Class is everywhere in popular culture. It can be found quite clearly in dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and in documentaries like *Benefits Street*. It would be impossible to understand either television programme without including a critical attention to representations of class. We see it explicitly in all sorts of other things: styles of dress, holiday destinations, the books and newspapers we read, the food we eat, the music we like, how we talk to each other, where we live, our dreams and hopes for the future. We also find it implicitly in the judgements that are made about how people dress and speak, where they take their holidays, the books and newspapers they read, the music they like, where they live, and how they imagine the future. In other words, class is there in the assumptions made about what is a good or bad lifestyle.

The chapter will begin with an account of the importance of class in the work of the founding fathers of cultural studies – Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and EP Thompson. This will be followed by a discussion of two theories of class that have been enormously influential in cultural studies, derived from the work of Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu. This will be followed by a case study that highlights the relationship between class and popular culture. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of an idea that is often deployed as a means to dismiss class as an explanatory concept – 'meritocracy'.

## Class in cultural studies

Until recently there was an argument that suggested that class should no longer be a central category in cultural studies. This can be illustrated by the experience of Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn. As they point out in the Preface to the paperback edition of their excellent book on culture and class:

For at least a decade or more before the publication of *Class and Contemporary British Culture* we had been experimenting with rudimentary drafts of a book manuscript on class and culture, none of which appealed to reviewers whose view was that scholarship on social class, especially in British cultural studies, was somewhat passé (Biressi and Nunn 2016: ix).

The experience of Biressi and Nunn might seem strange given the centrality of class in the emergence of British cultural studies, but there is no doubt that under the pressure of postmodernism, it had become a somewhat unfashionable concept. However, in recent times it has once again emerged as a concept that is indispensable when attempting to think critically about culture, whether our object of study is high or popular, production or consumption. While postmodernism had made class seem like an old-fashioned concept, and deindustrialization had made it less visible, and the ideology of neoliberalism had made it less available as a positive identity, the financial crash of 2008 and the politics of austerity that followed changed all this, making class suddenly very visible as a lived identity and giving the concept a new explanatory power.

Despite it going in and out of academic fashion, class was fundamental to the founding of cultural studies. Its interest in youth subcultures, resistance, hegemony and popular culture, all derived from a concern with class. The early work of three of its founding figures, Richard Hoggart, EP Thompson, and Raymond Williams is unthinkable without the concept of class. The point is obvious in the title of Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1980). The Preface to Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) begins with 'This book is about changes in working-class culture' (Hoggart 1990: 9). In *Culture and Society*, Williams (1963) argues that through the course of the Industrial Revolution a number of important words entered common usage or, where they had already existed, they acquired new meanings. Class was one of these words. As Williams (1983) points out, 'Development of class in its modern sense, with relatively fixed names for particular classes (lower class, middle class, upper class, working class and so on), belongs essentially to the period between 1770 and 1840, which is also the period of the Industrial Revolution and its decisive reorganisation of society' (Reader 61). Before this period, it was usual to describe social division with words such as rank, order, estate or degree. What these terms had in common was the implication that social division was 'natural' and had little to do with human actions. As Williams points out, 'the history of class, as a word which would supersede older terms for social division, relates to the increasing consciousness that social position is made rather than merely inherited' (ibid.). Moreover, it included the growing recognition that 'a particular social system . . . actually created social divisions' (Reader 62). In other words, the introduction of class is also an introduction of the idea that social division is humanly made and relates explicitly to how a society is organised. The person most associated with this idea is Karl Marx.

## Class struggle

Margaret Thatcher, who did more than most in recent times to rebalance class struggle in favour of the rich and powerful, once claimed that 'Class is a communist concept'

(quoted in Biressi and Nunn 2016: 202). Unlike many things she claimed, this is not entirely without foundation. Although, as we have seen, the concept of class predates Marx, it is certainly true that it was his work that gave it conceptual solidity.

As we saw in chapter 4, Marx defines class as a relationship to the prevailing mode of production. He argues that each significant period in history is constructed around a particular mode of production: that is, the way in which a society is organized (i.e. slave, feudal, capitalist) to produce the material necessities of life – food, shelter, etc.<sup>1</sup> In general terms, each mode of production produces: (i) specific ways of obtaining the necessities of life; (ii) specific social relationships between workers and those who control the mode of production, and (iii) specific social institutions (including cultural ones). At the heart of this analysis is the claim that how a society produces its means of existence (its ‘base’) ultimately determines the political, social and cultural shape of that society – its ‘superstructure’. As Marx explains, ‘The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general’ (1976a: 3).

The ‘base’ consists of a combination of the ‘forces of production’ and the ‘relations of production’. The forces of production refer to the raw materials, the tools, the technology, the workers and their skills, etc. The relations of production refer to the class relations of those engaged in production. It is in this sense that one’s class position is determined by one’s relationship to the mode of production. Therefore, each mode of production, besides being different, say, in terms of its basis in agrarian or industrial production, with corresponding tools and technologies, is also different in that it produces particular relations of production; that is, antagonistic class relations: the slave mode produces master/slave relations; the feudal mode produces lord/peasant relations; the capitalist mode produces capitalist/worker relations. The names change but the fundamental relationship remains much the same. In this way, then, class exists objectively in the ‘base’ as an economic relationship and subjectively in the ‘superstructure’ as a form of consciousness and lived practice.

According to this model all other class divisions are direct or indirect expressions of this fundamental binary relationship. Under the capitalist mode of production, there is division between those who own the means of production and those who have only their labour power to sell. This is the fundamental division that divides capitalist society. However, when we look at contemporary capitalist society it looks so much more complicated than this, and of course it is, but all the complications lead back to this foundational division. For example, senior managers may not be capitalist themselves, but the role they are employed to play is above all to manage the fortunes of capital and thus they are ideologically and materially working in the interest of capital. There are also residual and emergent class formations. For example, the landed aristocracy are what remains of the class structure of the feudal mode of production. Although economically and politically marginalized, they serve as a kind of decorative smokescreen, hiding the real basis of power in capitalist society. The self-employed (what Marx called the *petite bourgeoisie*) are another exception – they own the means of production but are capitalists without anyone to exploit. But again, as a class they are marginal to the main class division in capitalist society. Marx’s point is that these other divisions do

not undermine the central division because they are related to it and are in many ways subservient to it. Therefore, while there can be no doubt that class appears more complicated in the twenty-first century than it did when Marx was writing in the nineteenth, the different contemporary ways of describing the class structure often seem little more than ways of talking about social difference. For Marx class is not just a marker of social difference, it is a fundamental relationship based on the dominant mode of production. To discover endless gradations in this fundamental relationship does not in any way invalidate Marx's model of class and class struggle.

For Marx, recorded human history has been a history of class conflicts. The opening words of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1998) make this very clear:

The [written] history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles [in which] oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Reader 1998: 5).

If class was simply an economic category derived from a relationship with the prevailing mode of production, the idea of class consciousness and class struggle would have no meaning. While it is true that class is first and foremost an economic category, how it is lived and experienced is cultural. In this way, as we have already noted, class is always both objective and subjective, straddling both the base and the superstructure. It is founded on a particular relationship with the prevailing mode of production, but it only finds full expression when it defines itself against another class. The terms to mark this distinction are *class in itself* (objective category) and *class for itself* (subjective category). The first points to an economic relationship, the second is a form of consciousness and lived practice. As Ernst Fischer explains it, 'A class is born in the class struggle. Only through such struggle does it develop into a social and historical force' (1973: 73). As Marx explains, in a discussion of the nineteenth-century French peasantry, 'In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class' (1977: 106).

In other words, class is an objective category, in that it is a result of a relationship to the prevailing mode of production, and a subjective category to the extent that it produces a consciousness of this relationship. It is always what EP Thompson calls 'a historical phenomenon' (1980: 212). The common experience of class 'is largely determined by the productive relations into which men [and women] are born – or enter involuntarily' (9). However, the consciousness of class, the translation of experience into culture, 'is defined by men [and women] as they live their own history' (10). Therefore, it is not a 'thing', it is always a historical relationship of unity and difference: uniting one class as against another class or classes. As he explains, 'class happens when

some men [and women], as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men [and women] whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs' (8–9). Gramsci makes a similar point, a class always exhibits a certain 'homogeneity, self-awareness and organisation' (1971: 181). A class first constitutes itself on the basis of certain common economic interests. An awareness of these interests, gives rise to an awareness of the general economic interests of the class as a whole. This is followed by the establishment of an awareness of the unity of the economic, political, and cultural needs of the class. What the accounts of Marx, Thompson, Gramsci, and other Marxists share is an insistence that class is always both objective (based on an economic relationship) and subjective (it manifests itself in a particular way of seeing and being in the world).

### Consumption as class distinction

Perhaps the most interesting development in the study of class since Marx, certainly in terms of its influence on cultural theory and popular culture, is the work of Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, as Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams explain,

all societies are characterised by a struggle between groups and/or classes and class fractions to maximise their interests in order to ensure their reproduction. The social formation is seen as a hierarchically organised series of fields within which human agents are engaged in specific struggles to maximise their control over the social resources specific to that field, the intellectual field, the educational field, the economic field etc. . . . The fields are hierarchically organised in a structure over-determined by the field of class struggle over the production and distribution of material resources and each subordinate field reproduces within its own structural logic, the logic of the field of class struggle (1980: 215).

Bourdieu argues that class manifests itself in three forms of 'capital', economic, cultural and social. The first of these capitals connects most directly with Marx's theory of class. However, how class is lived and experienced tends to be a result of the articulation of cultural and social capital. Bourdieu demonstrates, for example, how particular patterns of consumption are ultimately about class difference and class distinction. He shows how arbitrary tastes and arbitrary ways of living are continually transmuted into legitimate taste and the only legitimate way of life. The 'illusion of "natural distinction" is ultimately based on the power of the dominant to impose, by their very existence, a definition of excellence which [is] nothing other than their own way of existing' (1992: 255). In other words, dominant classes seek to impose their own tastes as if these were in fact universal tastes.

Bourdieu's interest is in the processes by which patterns of consumption help to secure and legitimate forms of power and domination that are ultimately rooted in

economic inequality. He argues that although class rule is ultimately economic, the form it takes is cultural; patterns of consumption are used to secure social distinction, the making, marking and maintaining of social difference. The source of social difference and social power is thus symbolically shifted from the economic field to the field of consumption, making social power appear to be the result of a specific disposition. In this way, the production and reproduction of cultural space helps produce and reproduce social space, social power and class difference. In other words, what people consume does not simply reflect distinctions and differences embedded elsewhere, that consumption makes visible, rather consumption is the means by which difference and distinction are articulated, maintained and reproduced.

Bourdieu's purpose is not to prove the self-evident, that different classes have different patterns of consumption, but to show how consumption (from high art to food on the table) forms a distinct pattern of social distinction, and to identify and interrogate the processes by which the making and maintaining of these distinctions secures and legitimates forms of class power and control rooted ultimately in economic inequalities. He is interested not so much in the actual differences, but in how these differences are used by dominant classes as a means of social reproduction.

Bourdieu insists that taste is always more than an aesthetic category. As he points out, 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (6). We are classified by our classifications and classify others by theirs. In this way, he would argue that similar things are happening when I 'value' a holiday destination or a particular mode of dress, as are happening when I 'value' a poem by William Blake or a song by Bob Dylan or a play by Bertolt Brecht. Such valuations are never a simple matter of individual taste, consumption operates both to identify and to mark social distinction and to sustain social difference. While such strategies of classification do not in themselves produce social inequalities, the making, marking and maintaining of them functions to legitimate such inequalities. In this way, taste is a profoundly ideological discourse; it operates as a marker of 'class' (using the term in the double sense to mean both economic category and a particular level of quality). He argues that consumption is, ultimately, 'predisposed . . . to fulfil a social function of legitimating social difference' (7).

Bourdieu's work on consumption is underpinned by his view of education. Rather than being a means to lessen inequality, it functions to legitimate it. He argues that the education system fulfils a quite specific social and political function: that is, to legitimate social inequalities which exist prior to its operations. It achieves this by transforming social differences into academic differences, and presenting these differences as if they were 'grounded in nature' (387). The cultural tastes of dominant classes are given institutional form, and then, with deft ideological sleight of hand, their taste for this institutionalized culture (i.e. their own) is held up as evidence of their cultural, and, ultimately, their social, superiority. In this way, social distinction is generated by learned patterns of consumption that are internalized as 'natural' cultural preferences and interpreted and mobilized as evidence of 'natural' cultural competences, which are, ultimately, used to justify forms of class domination. Cultural and social capital is able to conceal and legitimate economic domination by reproducing it in the form of cultural and social hierarchies.

Sociologists often present Bourdieu's work on class as a theoretical advance on Marx, but in my view what Bourdieu offers is an elaboration of Marx and one that fundamentally depends on Marx for its coherence. In other words, his analysis is built on foundations laid by Marx. Beneath the very interesting concepts of cultural and social capital is economic capital, which is in part what Marx means by class as an economic category. But of course, as we have seen, Marx does not stop there, he goes on to suggest that class as an economic category is always articulated socially and culturally. Class may ultimately relate to one's place in the relations of production, but it is a position that requires a great deal of cultural and social work for it to appear 'natural'. What Bourdieu does, and does brilliantly, is show one of the significant ways in which class as an economic relationship works culturally – how it manifests itself in everyday lived experience.

## Class and popular culture

We can explore the entanglement of class and popular culture through many different examples. I am sure that readers of this book will not find it difficult to make the connection. I recently discussed (Storey 2016) it in relation to the invention of the traditional English Christmas, the Folk Revival, and the development of association football. In each entanglement, we find the middle class, like any other dominant class, being 'compelled . . . to represent its interests as the common interest of all members of society . . . to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones' (Marx and Engels 2009: 59). This attempt to build a cultural consensus based on relations of domination and subordination is part of what Gramsci (1971, 2009) would later define as hegemony. In each case, we see the playing-out of hegemony, as the middle class seek to establish a consensus which secures for itself a leading position in relation to the working class. In other words, to return to the quotation from Marx and Engels, we have in each example the playing out of the middle class's need to 'represent its interests as the common interest of all'.

Traditional histories of football present the development of the game as passing through four stages (Dunning 1971). In its first stage, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, it existed as a wild and unruly game played by all social classes. The term 'football' referred to ball games that involved both kicking and handling, and may even have been used to distinguish ball games played on foot rather than on horseback. What these games had in common was a ball and the idea of getting the ball to a 'goal', but the rules were oral and various. Teams could be any size from 20 up to 2,000, and the playing area could be the whole village, or the space between two villages. A game could last all day and was often played during village celebrations (Shrove Tuesday, village fairs and feasts, etc.).

In the second stage, from about 1750 to 1840, under the pressures of the Industrial Revolution, the game disappeared as a popular sport. That is to say, the enclosure movement and urbanisation removed areas where the game might be played, industrialisation introduced a stricter work discipline and the new policing system enforced the law more efficiently. What remained of the popular game survived, it was claimed, only in the

universities and public schools. But even here the game was discouraged because like the game that had once existed outside these institutions, it was violent and unruly.

In the third stage, from about 1840 to 1860, the status of sport began to change: it was now seen as good for 'elite' males. Team sports, especially football, were character building, increased physical health, discipline and moral responsibility. The Clarendon Commission of 1864, established to investigate the public schools, was very clear on the benefits of sport:

The cricket and football fields . . . are not merely places of amusement; they help to form some of the most valuable social qualities and manly virtues, and they hold, like the classroom and the boarding house, a distinct and important place in public school education (quoted in Walton and Walvin 1988: 299).

During this period, the game is supposedly civilised and codified by the public schools.

In the final stage, from about 1850 to 1890, ex-public schoolboys established the Football Association in 1863 and the FA Cup in 1871 and then, working like colonial missionaries, gradually introduced the new civilised and codified game to the working class. In an account of the development of the game, written in 1906, the author is quite clear of the role played by, in particular, Eton, Harrow, Westminster and Charterhouse: 'football, in its modern form, is entirely the product . . . of the various public school games' (quoted in Taylor 2013: 22). The Wanderers were the first winners of the FA Cup. The social make-up of their team tells us a great deal about the game as played in the early days of the FA. The team included four Harrow graduates, three old Etonians, and one each from Westminster, Charterhouse, Oxford and Cambridge.

Football, it seemed, was a game intended for the middle class, but despite this it very quickly grew to become what James Walvin (2000) calls the 'people's game'. The initial challenge to the hegemony of the middle class came from Blackburn, Lancashire. In 1882, Blackburn Rovers got to the FA Cup final, losing 1–0 to Old Etonians. However, the following year, Blackburn Olympic not only reached the final, they actually won the cup, beating Old Etonians 2–1. The *Blackburn Times* (1883) understood very well how Blackburn Olympic's victory was entangled with social class:

The meeting and vanquishing, in a most severe trial of athletic skill, of a club composed of sons of some of the families of the upper class in the Kingdom . . . as the Old Etonian Club is, by a Provincial Club composed of entirely, we believe, of Lancashire Lads of the manual working-class, sons of small tradesmen, artisans, and operatives (quoted in Walton and Walvin 1988: 299).

Blackburn Olympic's team consisted of three weavers, a dental assistant, a gilder, a plumber, a clerk, a loomer, a licensed victualler and two iron-foundry workers. A team of ex-public schoolboys would never again win the FA Cup.

From the 1870s, football as a socially organised sport developed rapidly amongst the working class of the midlands and north (especially Lancashire). Football clubs were established in different ways: through existing sports clubs (for example, Burnley,



Sheffield Wednesday, Preston North End, Derby County, Notts County); promoted by religious organisations (for example, Aston Villa, Barnsley, Blackpool, Bolton Wanderers, Everton, Manchester City, Birmingham City); represented workplaces (for example, Stoke City, West Bromwich Albion, Manchester United, Coventry City, Crewe Alexandra); and by teachers and ex-pupils (for example, Blackburn Rovers, Leicester City, Sunderland).

The establishment of the Football League in 1888 was an inevitable consequence of professionalism. In order to pay wages, clubs needed reliable and regular fixtures. In 1884, Preston North End were expelled from the FA Cup because it was claimed they had used professional players. An inquiry was inconclusive, but it did discover that they had arranged jobs for players (i.e. sinecures that allowed them to be in effect full-time players). Preston got support from 40 clubs from the north and midlands. Together they threatened to form a British FA. In January 1885, professionalism was legalised. The Football League was founded three years later in 1888. Of the eleven founding teams, six were from Lancashire (Preston North End, Blackburn Rovers, Bolton Wanderers, Accrington, Everton, Burnley) and five from the midlands (Aston Villa, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Derby County, Notts County, Stoke City).

Why did the game develop so quickly in the industrial north and midlands? One compelling answer is that it had never really gone away. As we noted earlier, according to conventional accounts there was pre-industrial football, which disappeared as a popular game under the pressures of the Industrial Revolution. However, the public schools held on to the game, codified and civilised it, and introduced it to the world with the establishment of the FA and the FA Cup. But there is another possibility: it did not disappear but, as in the public schools, it continued to evolve in the new industrial towns and cities. In other words, the public-school version was just one version, but a version with the power to impose itself on the formal organisation of the game and on the writing of the game's history. But alongside this version there existed another version we might call working-class football. The existence of this second version would also help explain how what is presented as the public school game was able to develop so rapidly in the industrial north and the midlands.

An article published in 1838 in *Bell's Life in London*, at a time when the game had supposedly disappeared as a popular sport, offers evidence for the existence of a working-class version of the game:

A match at football will be played at the cricket ground, Leicester, on Good Friday next, between eleven (principally printers) from Derby and the same number of Leicester. The winners to challenge an equal number from any town in England, for a purse not exceeding £25 (quoted in Walton and Walvin 1988: 299).

In 1842, a witness at a Parliamentary inquiry into the conditions of working-class children in the mining areas of the North of England wrote:

Although Christmas Day and Good Friday were the only fixed holidays in the mining region of Yorkshire, children had at least one day off a week and a fair portion of time in the evening. This they could use to play sport on the considerable areas

of wasteland in the neighbourhood. Their games included cricket, nur and spell [a bat and ball game] and football (quoted in Harvey 2005: 59).

Although children working long hours in the mining industry and then playing on wasteland offers little to celebrate, it does present evidence that football had continued to exist outside the universities and public schools. Therefore, although the middle class established the FA and the FA Cup, the game's rapid development from the 1870s onwards in the industrial north and midlands suggests that the popular game had not disappeared; rather, it had simply changed in ways quite similar to what had happened to it in the public schools. Again, it is impossible to fully understand the complex history of the development of the game, and how this history has been written, without including as part of the explanation the important role played by social class.

## The ideological work of meritocracy

Meritocracy is perhaps the great lie of class inequality. As Jo Littler (2013; see also Littler 2017) points out, it is 'a mechanism to both perpetuate, and create, social and cultural inequality' (Reader 53). Rather than accept it as an obvious good,

we should pay close attention to meritocracy because it has become a key ideological means by which plutocracy – or government by a wealthy elite – perpetuates itself through neoliberal culture. It is not, in other words, merely a coincidence that the common idea that we live, or should live, in a meritocratic age co-exists with a pronounced lack of social mobility and the continuation of vested hereditary economic interests (ibid.).

Littler identifies five assumptions that underpin meritocracy. The first is that 'intelligence' and 'talent' are innate qualities. In other words, it is an argument that an expensive education makes little difference to your perceived talent and intelligence. This is then connected to a second assumption: natural intelligence and talent combined with effort is what is required to achieve success. A meritocratic society, therefore, is a society structured by only inequalities of natural talent and intelligence guided by effort. Of course, not all talented and intelligent people will make it to the top, but this is seen as acceptable because the system is competitive. So, if you are at the bottom, it is either because you do not have the necessary talent and intelligence to succeed or because you were not competitive enough to win (to have winners we must have losers). Such an assumption fits perfectly with the dominant idea of capitalism that competition is an ultimate good.

A third assumption, perhaps the key assumption, follows from and supports the first two: the idea that talent and intelligence plus effort produce merit is saying something politically even more important: circumstances of birth and social structure are irrelevant to social and economic achievement. One of the great myths of capitalist society

is that everyone has the freedom to climb the ladder of success. Social mobility ensures that the best rise to the top and we end up with a hierarchy we all deserve. To dismiss the idea that individual merit alone determines social destination is not to deny that social mobility exists. But even the mobility that exists is often greatly exaggerated, often as a means to defend what is mostly a strong and stable class structure, ultimately determining where we end up regardless of talent and hard work. For example, I am a professor from a working-class background (my father was an unskilled worker and my mother a cleaner), indicating that social mobility exists, but the fact that the vast majority of professors do not come from such a background also makes clear that social mobility is in this instance very limited. So, while we can always point to examples of social mobility, its impact on class structure is often exaggerated. Moreover, if our focus is the very top and bottom, social mobility is very limited indeed (i.e. few rise from the very bottom and few fall from the very top).

A fourth assumption concerns what counts as merit. On investigation, it quickly becomes clear that merit is an outcome often determined by the so-called 'market', in which certain professions attract more money and status. This has produced a situation in which a professional footballer who entertains earns considerably more than a nurse or doctor who saves lives. The final assumption is that it is better at the top than the bottom of society. While you might say, well, of course it is, the logic behind this is to produce a validation of upper class lifestyles and a devaluation of the lives of the working class.

Together the five assumptions underpin, support and justify the idea that we live in a meritocratic society. If a society is meritocratic it means that divisions and inequalities are based on natural talent, intelligence and hard work, rather than being derived from the class structure and its reproduction of economic inequalities. The role of the meritocratic state is to reproduce the conditions which enable the 'best' to rise to the top. The problem with this is revealed when we examine the background of those who make it to the top. Only 7% of the population of the UK go to independent schools (i.e. expensive fee-paying schools)<sup>2</sup> and yet 71% of top judges, 62% of senior military officers, 55% of civil service permanent secretaries, and 53% of Diplomats attended such schools? (Acred 2016: 16). This hardly seems to suggest that our class position is the result of individual merit and has little to do with inherited structures of privilege and inequality. Once we consider such statistics, class position seems far more important than talent, intelligence and hard work. Now this is not to say that some at the top are not talented, intelligent and work hard, only that it was not just these supposed natural attributes and effort that got them there. Or to put it another way, if the myth were true it would mean that working-class people lack intelligence and talent and do not work hard. But it does not take too much imagination to realise that class division and inequality has kept hidden from public recognition working-class people who might have made a significant contribution to, for example, the arts, science, or politics. As Ernst Bloch put it, 'history is crammed with those unfavourable circumstances which prevented the great talent from being aware of itself, and then from developing' (1995: 460). Or as the poet Thomas Gray expressed it, 'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen/And waste its sweetness on the desert air' (1997).

Under the myth of meritocracy class difference becomes a structure in which natural abilities and hard work locate you at the top, in the middle, or at the bottom. Social

inequality is a symptom of lack of natural abilities and a failure to work hard. In other words, in a meritocratic society you get what you deserve. While this might sound logical and fair, and this is often how it is seen by those born into the dominant class, it is in effect little more than an ideological screen to disguise the real causes of class division and inequality.

## Notes

1. Of course, what counts as necessities is historically and socially variable.
2. The misleadingly titled public schools can be very expensive indeed. Fees at Eton, Harrow and Winchester, for example, are more than £37,000 a year. The average annual wage in the UK is around £26,500. Comparing the two tells us a great deal about the ideological work required of the concept of meritocracy.

## Further reading

Storey, John (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th edn, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2009. This is the companion volume to the previous edition of this book. A fully updated 5th edition containing further readings is due for publication in 2018. An interactive website is also available ([www.routledge.com/cw/storey](http://www.routledge.com/cw/storey)), which contains helpful student resources and a glossary of terms for each chapter.

Atkinson, Will, *Class*, Cambridge: Polity, 2015. Leaving aside the book's rather simplistic understanding of Marxism, it is nevertheless an excellent introduction to debates on class and class struggle.

Biressi, Anita, and Nunn, Heather, *Class and Contemporary British Culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. An excellent account of the entanglement of class and contemporary culture.

Clarke, John, et al., *Working Class Culture*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Hutchinson University Library: London, 1979. A collection of interesting essays on class from the institutional home of cultural studies.

Edge, Sarah, *The Extraordinary Archive of Arthur J Munby: Photography, Class and Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, London: IB Tauris, 2017. A fascinating account of the representation of class in the nineteenth century.

Littler, Jo, *Against Meritocracy*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. An absolutely key book for understanding the ideological work performed by the concept of meritocracy.

Munt, Sally, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, London: Continuum, 2000. A very clear argument why cultural studies should return to class as a primary object of study.

Skeggs, Beverley, *Formations of Class & Gender*, London: Sage, 1997. One of the most significant attempts in cultural studies to foreground class as an explanatory concept.

Storey, John (ed.), *The Making of English Popular Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. An excellent collection of essays that use class as an explanatory concept.