

The Condition of the Working Class: Representation and Praxis
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Abstract

This essay reflects critically on the political context production process, ideas and strategies of our feature length documentary film *The Condition of the Working Class*. It explores why we were inspired by Friedrich Engels' 1844 book of the same name and how that connects with the neo-liberal capitalist project that has dominated the political scene internationally for several decades. We conceptualise our film as constellation, in the manner of Walter Benjamin, between the 1840s and the contemporary moment. The essay explores the production process of the film which involved setting up and working in conjunction with a theatrical project. The essay explores how the question of class was emerges within the production process, especially the geographical terrain of the city, just as it did for Engels. The essay reflects on the theatrical work of John McGrath and its connections with our own work. In the final section of the essay, the authors consider the finished film in more detail, analyzing how the film focused on the process of theatrical production and contextualised that process within wider spatial and temporal frames. The film and the theatre project explore the possibility of reconstituting in a microcosm a working class collective subject, that has been atomized and demonized by 30 years of neo-liberal policy, that in the context of the present economic crisis, seeks to drive its project even further.

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This essay reflects critically on our feature length documentary film, *The Condition of the Working Class* (2012). Inspired by Friedrich Engels' 1844 book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, our film attempted to explore the continuing relevance of Engels' class analysis for working class people while giving them an agency and authorship within the film which is unusual within the documentary tradition. Below we explore the political, economic and cultural context from which our film emerges and to which it is a kind of intervention. We then explore the production process of the film which involved setting up a theatrical project that would form the narrative backbone of the film. We explore the ideas underlying the approach we took in relation to both the documentary film and the theatrical project and how questions of class were central to the production process. In the final section of this essay we analyze the finished film and its strategies of representation. The film focuses on the process of production behind the finished show in order to explore how working class consciousness and consciousness of working class history can be repaired.

Background

What happens when a category such as class disappears from public discourse and consciousness but the realities which the category refers to are still very much in play? In such a situation we can expect class to be replaced by a coded language of euphemisms and misrepresentations. In the UK the current Coalition government talks of 'scroungers' and skivers' as part of its astonishingly ambitious dismantling of the Welfare State. We have here a return to a Victorian discourse of the deserving and undeserving poor. The deserving poor it seems are those who need little or no state support while the undeserving poor do not deserve state support. Either way, social provision is scaled back for the majority. The current situation has a prior history which stretches back to the Thatcher governments of the 1980s but was continued under the New Labour

governments between 1997-2010. Labour historically has been seen as the party that represents the interests of the working class. But under the leadership of Tony Blair, *New Labour* sought to distance itself from the values and politics and even people who labour once stood for. In 1995 New Labour scrapped Clause Four of the Labour Party constitution, which connected the party to the socialist goal of common ownership of the means of production. Over the years the very composition of Labour MPs has altered, with the disappearance of MPs from trade union backgrounds and their replacement by graduates from Oxford and Cambridge. This retreat from working class politics has meant that the left and the wider public do not have the analytical tools and conceptual frameworks to understand the deeper causal forces shaping the contemporary social and economic landscape. Effects are no longer traced back to real causes and this opens up the space for right wing politics to displace public anger and anxiety onto a whole range of demonized others (immigrants, Europe, Muslims, feral youth, etc).

Academia of course, so prone to fashion, has hardly provided a bulwark against this retreat. Although cultural studies emerged out of a strong, often ethnographic engagement with the working class, it has long since succumbed to various forms of identity politics. As Mike Savage notes:

In many respects cultural studies offers the most intriguing case to reflect on the intellectual trajectory of the concept of class consciousness. It is remarkable that a discipline which emerged in the 1960s primarily as a set of intellectual reflections on class cultures has, in less than thirty years, shifted its intellectual foundations so much that the study of class has almost entirely disappeared from its agenda (Savage 2000: 31).

Even sociology, which historically has been virtually synonymous with class analysis, has shifted towards highly theoretical, non-empirical discussion of social trends in which class is effaced. The influential work of Anthony Giddens is a case in point (Millner 1999: 86-91). Much academic Marxism meanwhile has

lost confidence in value theory and with that class difference and class conflict, as opposed to a rather more general analysis of alienation, has been marginalized from its agenda (Savage 2000:8-15).

In high Marxist theory, critiques of value have been uncoupled from class exploitation and class difference and instead have become linked to a more amorphous sense of alienation and critique of the fetishism of the commodity form in which labor and the working class has little emancipatory power (see Postone 1993). Value as an economic category acknowledged by policymakers has morphed into an almost exclusive focus on value as a moral-cultural category (Skeggs 2004: 82). The retreat from class manifests itself in political discourse as a shift from an acknowledgment of economic determinants shaping the lives of working people, to cultural explanations of poverty and behavior. Culture facilitates a way of thinking that blames individuals for their circumstances rather than socio-economic inequalities and their policy-making drivers. So people are poor because they lack ambition, they do not aspire to something better, they are work-shy, they are old-fashioned archaic residues of the past, clinging to the periphery of the 'modern' world and as an obstacle to modernity (Skeggs 2004: 94). The media is replete with images of the working class as dysfunctional and pathological, media fodder for day-time television programmes such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* and other television programmes where 'professionals' pass judgment on them. The level of anti-working class sentiment in the UK and its generalization across the media and public conversation is extremely widespread (Jones 2011). One-dimensional stereotypes of working people are routine on television, in the papers and in major feature films, where a highly classed agenda pushing classlessness flourishes (Neville 2011).

The representation of the condition of the working class in the media and political discourse is of course fundamentally linked to the changing socio-economic condition of the working class. That socio-economic condition has worsened considerably as the neo-liberal project of dismantling the post 1945 Welfare State has gained momentum. Rights to good housing and education and

health care have been eroded as social stratification has deepened. Full-employment has been abandoned as a policy goal and replaced with unemployment, under-employment, casualized labour and zero-hour contracts. Much of the manufacturing base of the UK has been decimated and relocated to the Global South while state safety nets have been mercilessly cut back. Such changes in the political-economy of the country has fundamentally re-shaped the working class.

Traditionally they were seen as predominantly male and rooted in the communities they lived in. The working class was industrial and unionised and acknowledged as integral to the economic and cultural health and future of the nation. This discourse around the working class has been transformed over the last thirty years as neo liberal policies have overseen a rapid change to a service sector economy and a marked shift in focus from the working class as the 'salt of the earth' to the 'scum of the earth'. Representations of the working class are utilized to conjure up images of a 'broken society', where an out of control minority makes life unpalatable for the majority. Neo-liberalism is returning to the laissez-faire economy of the nineteenth century, where capital had relatively few social obligations imposed on it. The politics of social consensus and social democracy emerged in the 1930s after the laissez-faire economy crashed world-wide, and with communism menacing the capitalist order from the Soviet Union, the Welfare State emerged as a compromise between the demands of labor and capitalist imperatives. It is crucial to realize that the Welfare State was an aberration that lasted little more than a generation and now it is back to business as usual.

What was striking to us when we read Engels' book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was the shocking relevance its analysis still had for the 21st century. Engels shows how work, education, diet, home life, mortality, relations with the law, general culture and even the structural layout of the new urban conurbations, were shaped by class power, class interests and class values. Just as today, the media, the intelligentsia and the politicians use a language of

morality and culture to obfuscate the real socio-economic causes, so too did the bourgeoisie of Engels' time:

The writers of the English bourgeoisie are crying murder at the demoralizing tendency of the great cities;...this is natural, for the propertied class has too direct an interest in the other conditions which tend to destroy the worker body and soul. If they should admit that 'poverty, insecurity, overwork, forced work, are the chief ruinous influences', they would have to draw the conclusion, 'then let us give the poor property, guarantee their subsistence, make laws against overwork'; and this the bourgeoisie dare not formulate (Engels 2005: 146-7)

Engels' analysis cuts through the verbiage that clogs up the contemporary public sphere because he was unembarrassed about laying bare the fundamental relationship between those who own the means of production and those who sell their labour to those owners. That antagonistic relationship has not disappeared despite more than 150 years of technological progress. The massive development of the infrastructure of a modern society (sewage systems, roads, gas and electricity, water supplies, communication systems, etc) may entice us, along with a barrage of mass cultural propaganda, to think that class no longer runs through society and that we are all equally 'free', but as Engels noted sourly: 'Fine freedom, where the proletarian has no other choice than that of either accepting the conditions which the bourgeoisie offers him, or starving...' (Engels 2005: 112).

This is not to say that there have been no significant changes since Engels' time. There have. When Engels was writing working class organisations, political consciousness and culture was extremely robust and well developed. The Chartist movement was agitating for political reform as a means of improving material conditions. 1842 had seen a mass strike in the greater Manchester region while the Chartist press was read by hundreds of thousands of workers. In Manchester Engels regularly frequented the Owenite Hall of Science on

Sundays where he was initially surprised by the presence of working class orators giving speeches on politics, religion and social affairs (Frow & Frow 1995:7). He noted that the workers had a rich literary culture that included Proudhon and the revolutionary poets Byron and Shelly (Engels 2005: 245).

The contemporary situation is of course very different. Working class culture in England especially, organization and consciousness has been smashed up by the neo-liberal onslaught and in its place the workers have been offered a mass culture of celebrities, corporate entertainments, unobtainable wish-fulfillments, and training in consumerism and individualistic self-improvement. This situation poses the problem of how to make a film inspired by a revolutionary text in the context of a very un-revolutionary situation. The danger is that you end up making a doctrinaire film removed from the concrete experiences of the working class. One way of thinking about what our film was trying to achieve is in terms of Walter Benjamin's concept of history. Benjamin critiqued historiography that assumed a steady linear march of progress into a brighter future. Beneath such conceptions Benjamin spied all the blood, death and barbarism of the conquered and the vanquished (Benjamin 1999: 248). His famous Angel of History image, inspired by a Paul Klee painting, sees 'progress' in terms of a 'catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' (Benjamin 1999: 249). It was for this reason that Benjamin was interested in historical fragments and detritus for he thought that what had been forgotten and marginalized told us more about real history than the official narratives. A linear vision of historical progress would inevitably marginalize Engels' text as something of a museum piece. But a non-linear, dialectical conception of history grasps Engels' moment as relevant to ours. There are moments in history when the working class make gains, win some power and victories. Such moments have to be erased from the historical record as far as capitalism is concerned. Recovering such moments requires constructing a 'constellation' between past and present. Our film set out to do this, trying to reassemble the fragments of contemporary working class culture, history, memory and consciousness by bringing Engels' text into a definite relationship with the now.

Central to this project was that working class people would be able to author their own stories and that they would have an agency within the film that was usually denied to them. Even within the social democratic era, when representations of working people tended to be more positive, they were generally portrayed in fairly paternalistic ways by professional middle class filmmakers. Another model that was and remains prevalent was the victim model, where workers were shown as suffering from various social problems and were waiting for the beneficial intervention of the 'authorities' (other professional middle class people) who could help them out. (Winston 1988). Such frameworks carefully manage, contain and filter working class experiences according to the institutionalized norms of middle class dominated media apparatuses. Thus a YouGov poll at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 2006 showed that a majority of people working in British television thought that the character Vicky Pollard from the show *Little Britain* was an accurate representation of the British working class (Jones 2011: 127). In the neo-liberal context especially, the public sphere is dominated by one-dimensional stereotypes which people, especially middle class people then take as the full reality of working class lives (O'Neill 2013)

The Production Process

Our starting point for the film *The Condition of the Working Class* was the problem of how to use Engels' text as an inspiration for a film about the contemporary period. The book, part history, part sociology, part political polemic does not automatically lend itself to being turned into a film. It took some time and much discussion before we hit upon the idea of using a theatrical project as a vehicle to make the sort of film we wanted to make. The idea was to issue a public call in the Manchester and Salford areas for a group of volunteers to come together and devise a play that in some way incorporated Engels' book as source material. The film would then have as its narrative backbone, a record of this process of theatrical production around which other material, such as

archive footage and interviews with people who lived and worked in the area. The advantage of using the play as a vehicle was that it would give the participants a real creative agency within the film and we hoped that we would capture them going through a process of learning, reflection and critical engagement about working class life.

There was no auditioning process involved, everyone who contacted us and who wanted to participate in the project was invited to do so. There was never an intention to implement a criteria of professional expertise that would measure people's ability and exclude people on that basis. We wanted to foster a co-operative ethos rather than a competitive one. The only criteria we had was that people self-identified as working class. We wanted to use theatre but not reproduce the dominant practices of bourgeois theatre. Initially around 30 people contacted us and expressed an interest in being involved. However, we lost around half of that number when people realized the time commitment involved. The cast would have just 8 weeks to write, stage and rehearse a theatrical show that would be performed in Manchester, Salford and London. In retrospect it became clear that a particular strata of working class people self-selected to join the project. In general the participants came from working class backgrounds, often the manual working class, but they had all gone on to get an education or professional training beyond the compulsory education system which had served their working class peers so poorly. One of the major themes of the play and the film was that their experience of education was not straightforward, but instead a highly fraught encounter with class based discrimination. Based in London as we were, our advertising of the project in newspapers and cafes and through social media networks could really only hope to draw the interest of this strata of working class people. We make no pretense that the group of people who are represented on the film represent the 'working class' in its totality. That would be absurd. In order to have involved those stratas of the working class who are even more disadvantaged, we would have needed to have been in situ in Manchester and Salford and we would have had to run some sort of outreach project that would have actively targeted and recruited people rarely included in these kind of cultural activities. However, we did not

have the resources to lay this kind of groundwork. The people who did participate in the project, had the cultural resources and competences to feel that this creative project was something that they could do. This was a group of people who had an awareness of and confidence in their abilities, an awareness and confidence that has been actively undermined by the various educational and cultural organs of capitalist society for many other strata of the working class.

If the group who participated in the project cannot, even in class terms, be described as 'universal', although their collective experiences can be described as working class, there is also the problem that, very much against our intentions, the group that eventually formed were all white. We were of course aware that Manchester in particular is a highly diverse city. However, what we did not realize, as Londoners, is that while ethnically diverse, it is also much more ethnically segregated than London. Different communities do not interact, mix or even live in the same areas. Again, as on the question of class, we would have needed much more lead in time while based in Manchester to actively address this issue and ensure more ethnic diversity than we in fact had. Initially, out of the group of thirty people who contacted us, there were some Black and Asian people. However, they were among the fifty per cent or so that were unable to continue due to commitments elsewhere. Once the project was underway and we realized we had a problem with the ethnic homogeneity of the group, we had a very small window of opportunity to try to construct a more ethnically representative group, which we did try, unsuccessfully, to do. At the end of the second week, the group had already met some eight times. The process of writing was underway and relationships within the group of people, most of whom had not known each other before, were forming. We were also increasingly aware that introducing one or two people at that stage would have smacked of ticking an ethnic diversity quota checkbox that would have been offensive and tokenistic. Despite this the show and the film did address how ethnicity intersects with class and how racism can divide the working class.

As the theatrical group were our main social actors in the film, this skew in the ethnic homogeneity of the group also had an impact on the film of course. However, the film did not exclusively focus on the participants in the theatrical project. We also went outside this group as part of our attempts to contextualize what they were doing and this gave us the opportunity to try and register something of the ethnic diversity of the contemporary working class. Indeed a centre-piece moment and one which audiences regularly cite as the most powerful interview in the film, comes from a black working class women called Angie who runs a small shoe shop in Manchester's Moss Side. Nevertheless in the reception of the film in London, the issue of ethnic diversity has been raised in audience Q&As, both by black and white audience members. However there is no homogeneity in the responses of the audience to this issue, with just as many black people arguing that the class issue is rightly to the fore given the focus of the film. Angie herself talks in the film in terms of the class differences and class power that are detrimentally affecting the community in Moss Side, rather than race. One of the interesting things about our interview with Angie is that within the space of a ten-minute interview she went from someone who was outwardly very happy to talk to us, to someone who had to stop the interview because she was so upset about the conditions she herself was describing. The anger and pain bubbling beneath the surface of people's lives is a reoccurring theme in the film and this highlights the importance of telling your own stories, something we will return to later.



Angie talks about the class power that has pushed Moss Side into poverty.

Before the project started we knew that we would have to work with an artistic director to pull together the theatrical show. We considered it to be of the utmost importance that the artistic director came from a working class background. It would have negatively changed the complexion of the project had we introduced someone who was used to working with middle class people in a middle class environment. Even though the person we approached, Jimmy Fairhurst, had been trained as an actor, he came from the same socio-economic background and geographical (and therefore regional culture) as the participants in the project. This was crucial because the artistic director could relate immediately to their experiences of discrimination and struggle that the participants had encountered. They were able to build up a relationship with the artistic director very quickly. They did not have to explain or justify anything because the shared sense of a common experience within the group also extended to Jimmy.

As the identity of the theatrical group solidified, they decided to name themselves The Ragged Collective in a homage to Robert Tressell's famous book, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*. It became clear fairly quickly in discussions

with the group that the raw material that would form the basis of the show were the real life stories and anecdotes that they brought to the sessions and the creative writing which some of them produced in the form of dramatic sketches, poems and songs. Engels' book was a kind of touchstone and talking point, keeping the focus very much on class. Everyone was given a booklet made up of passages from Engels' book. His text was a starting point for discussions and rehearsals. His words were integrated into the finished play and the film and provided a source of inspiration in general. One of the participants, J.D. wrote a wonderful poem called Salford Quays after we posted some photographs of the area on Facebook and reminded the group what Engels wrote about how capital and class shape urban geography. As Engels noted:

The town itself is peculiarly built , so that a person may live in it for years, and go in and out daily without coming into contact with a working people's quarter or even with workers, that is, so long as he confines himself to his business or to his pleasure walks...The working people's quarters are sharply separated from the sections of the city reserved for the middle class; or, if this does not succeed, they are concealed with the cloak of charity (Engels 2005: 85)

In response to this J.D. writes about the former dockyards now gentrified as a hub for the middle class culture industries. The poem is constructed around a middle class narrator making a direct address to a working class that had historically worked and lived in Salford Quays:

This is my world
My own little hub
Full of people like me
To join the yacht club
Removed from your stench
Keep out if you please
You may have built it
But it's my Salford Quays.

The classed nature of the urban geography also had an impact on our planning for the project. When researching for places to rehearse, we found very few suitable venues and initially decided on a theatre and workshop space called The Edge in the middle class district of Chorlton. We had our own misgivings about the venue and the location because of its classed nature and wondered if this might put working class people off from participating in the project. Our worries were confirmed when we spoke in the weeks before the project got underway to Ray, one of the interested participants, who would become a key figure in the project. He told us that he did not think it was a good venue because working class people neither lived in nor visited Chorlton. This was yet another example of what Engels called the 'unconscious tacit agreement' (Engels 2005: 85) by which the classes were separated in the city. As Londoners, we had only a limited knowledge of Manchester and Salford (although they are distinct cities they virtually merge into one another) and it was not until we spoke to a writer for the Salford Star, who was interviewing us and advertising the forthcoming theatrical project, that we were steered towards our eventual main home for the rehearsals, the Salford Arts Theatre. This is a voluntary run theatre right in the middle of a working class estate in a working class area, and therefore one that would not be intimidating to our working class participants. However we could not book as many rehearsals at the Salford Arts Theatre as we needed to, so we also booked some time at the Nexus Art Café in the fashionable Northern Quarter of central Manchester. Here we had another reminder in how the classing of space works to exclude people. We noticed that a group of four who were all coming by one car, kept arriving an hour late for rehearsals at the Nexus. When we asked why, we were told that because the expensive parking meters do not clock off until 8pm, they could not come any earlier. Once again, economics and geography mesh together to tacitly exclude people from what are ostensibly public spaces.

The Marxist theatre director and dramatist John McGrath was very aware of how geography and class connect together and this is why he took his shows on the

road, bringing them to the homes and venues of working class people. The usual practice of theatre is that it is a static venue in a impressive building to which theatre goers travel. But all the economic and cultural capital that is built into that notion of theatre going has the effect of teaching people who is welcome and who is not (Bourdieu 1996). In the 1970s McGrath and his company 7:84 was a leading force in the radical theatrical movement that was emerging in a context of increasing working class militancy and which gained a claim for arts funding from the state. For McGrath, the task was to develop,

... a kind of theatre that tells the story from a different perspective, in a language that a different group of people understand, i.e. to create a working class form of theatre appropriate to the late twentieth century, we have to look at the language of working class entertainment, at least to see what kind of language it is (McGrath 1996: 22).

In order to do this McGrath immersed himself in the cultural world of the working classes. In his book *A Good Night Out, Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* he recounts his visit to a working men's club in Chorlton Manchester back in the 1963, the same Chorlton that had been massively gentrified since the 1990s and had proved an inappropriate location for our project. Back then however things were rather different. McGrath finds in the club a rumbustious cocktail of working class entertainments that includes copious amounts of drink, comedy, music hall acts such as ventriloquism, singing, musical numbers, bingo, a lot of banter, wrestling, strip tease, a bit of a fight and all presided over by a skilled compere. McGrath is not at all romantic about this culture, noting its propensity towards sexism and authoritarianism, but he does see in its liveliness, its energy, its participatory values, an embryonic democratic and non-hierarchical culture from which something could be built. This genuinely popular culture, as opposed to the one mediated by a corporate mass entertainment system, has historically attracted radical cultural producers such as Brecht and Eisenstein. One of the elements that McGrath is drawn to is the non-linear ensemble of acts that make up a 'good night out'. This conception was the

bedrock of Brecht's epic theatre and Sergei Eisenstein's conception of a cinema based on a montage of attractions or 'shocks'. Tom Gunning (2004) has suggested that early cinema, around the 1900s, was initially an extension of working class culture, rooted in traditions of variety and the circus. The short film was often part of a variety of entertainments. The experience was much more participatory and located in the back of shops and pre-existing as opposed to purpose built buildings. The cinema experience was more integrated into the daily routines and life of the working people. It was only later with the building of the great picture palaces in middle class areas that cinema became a big event, a night out, a clearly separate and specialized leisure time activity. As the cinema was taken over by big business so the representation of life on the screen adjusted, with business being seen more favorably and middle class life and lifestyles tacitly promoted as the prized norm (Mitchell 1991, Ross 1998)

Our project was attempting to construct a space that could recreate a theatrical culture and from that a documentary film rooted in working class culture and experience which the dominant forms of theatre and cinema had insulated themselves from. In addition to Engels, McGrath's work on theatre was introduced into the project as an important point of reference, another Benjaminian constellation that could re-animate a radical theatrical project that had once flourished. The participants were shown the television adaptation of McGrath's famous 1973 play *The Cheviot The Stag and the Black Black Oil*. The play was 'a massive success and widely credited with redefining the nature of Scottish theatre's subject matter, aesthetics, context of production and modes of reception' (Holdsworth 2005:26). The play was important to us because of its unconventional way of telling a historical story, that stretches from the clearances of the people off the Scottish Highlands, to make way for sheep farming, through to the exploitation of the North Sea oil fields in the 1970s. The dramatic structure was informed by the distinctly Celtic popular form, the *ceilidh*, which is a social gathering built around singing, dancing, music and participation. The filmed version of the play, that was broadcast on BBC Television, also included dramatic reconstructions and interviews outside the space of the theatre show. We knew that our own film would also involve covering both what

was going on within the space of the theatre (although focusing on the process of production rather than a finished play) and connecting it to the wider social and historical context through archive footage and interviews with contemporary residents of Manchester and Salford. In order for us to make this connection, it was also important that the play whose process of production we were charting, did not emulate the conventional linear and naturalistic norms of bourgeois theatre. Because the play was composed of a series of vignettes made up of dramatic sketches, monologues, poems and songs it was conducive to making a film that had a non linear and open ended approach that was trying to reassemble the constituent elements of working class culture, experience, memory and consciousness into something that would be recognizable as a classed reality.

The Film

The Condition of the Working Class may be seen as an example of what the French called *Cinema Vérité*. We did not happen to stumble across a theatrical project that would have happened independently of the film. Instead the theatrical project was set up by us in order to provoke a certain situation and possibilities that would not have happened without our presence. The *Vérité* tradition is the antithesis of the non-interventionist norms of observational cinema. It is thus well suited to politically engaged filmmaking that does not pretend to adopt a neutral objectivist stance. Ideologies of professionalism adopt a cloak of neutrality largely by separating themselves from the social interests of the majority, which in turn allows them to be surreptitiously influenced by the social, political and economic power of the elite minority. This is how professionalism works within the mainstream news media (McChesney 2004). By contrast we took a position similar to a number of proponents of Third Cinema. For filmmakers such as Solanas and Getino, Jorges Sanjines and Raymundo Gleyzer radical cinema required breaking down such divisions of labour between

producers and subjects in front of the camera. This applied to our own approach to the project and we were part of the theatrical process and the collective that it fashioned.

The narrative backbone of the film is focused on the process of theatrical production that went into making the show that was performed after eight weeks of rehearsals. The film may be seen as subverting the popular reality Television format (itself a bastardisation of *Cinema Vérité*) where participants are given tasks and goals and their relationships are 'explored' in the course of the programme or series. However, where most reality Television programmes encourage competition and individualism amongst the participants (often including public voting for the watching audience) our documentary sought to encourage co-operation, solidarity, creativity and a learning experience that went beyond the individual. Our film also bears a certain superficial resemblance to that genre of popular films that centre around the 'performing working class' (Wayne 2006). Such films, set against the new post-industrial reality, chart the work that goes into training and re-training the working class body for a new career in the cultural and service industries. This process of transformation prises the character(s) out of their old-fashioned class identity and gives them a new identity based on middle class norms. *Billy Elliott* is the best (worst) example of this class acculturation process. Our film reverses this process. Instead of classed and collective experiences being turned into individual stories, we bring individual stories together that are revealed to be classed experiences that are significantly recycled from one generation to another with surprisingly little change.

The way in which the film is structured sees the participants tell their stories for the first time to the group. The viewer gets a sense of how this raw material was worked up into dramatic scenes in the rehearsals. As the film progresses we see the authors of those stories reflecting on how the process of production, of telling and reenacting their stories initiates a cognitive shift leading to a reformulation of the significance of what has happened to them. Lorraine's story for example, which she reads out to the group, tells of how as a bright working class kid, she

went to Richmond County School for Girls in the 1960s when her family moved to London. She recounts how at her first day at school, her accent and the regional phrases she used drew ridicule from the other girls who told her that she would soon be having elocution lessons so that she could speak 'properly'. This story formed the raw material for one of the show's dramatic sketches in which Lorraine narrates what happened to her while her younger self is played by another member of the cast, Rosie. The interesting thing about Rosie, which the film is able to bring out through interview and arrangement of the edited material, is that she suffered a very similar experience of class discrimination based on her Northern accent when she went for an audition at a famous theatre company. At question and answer sessions after film screenings, audience members have frequently recounted similar experiences of class discrimination based on speech. Such everyday but hidden injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb 1973) are often so naturalized that they are not subject to any interrogation by those who suffer them. It was the very process of not only telling their stories, but then re-experiencing them as dramatic constructions built up for the stage performance that allowed the participants to reflect on the meaning of those experiences, both for them as individuals, but gradually, through the film's process of construction, as classed collective experiences. So the partially buried individual memory becomes part of a recovered collective memory as what were once fractured episodes within the life of an individual become intelligible as part of a pattern of a class stratified society. This process initiates a growing sense of anger as the dominant modes of understanding that filtered and naturalized those experiences were dismantled. In a related way, for Michael, the project enabled him to recover a sense of righteous anger and resistance that his younger self had once had but which had been eroded over the years. The project offered a renewed sense of hope that collectively people can change things for the better. The film in turn preserves for the significance of this for others, rather than having just the lived experience restricted to the cast and subsequently dispersed as a transient moment of history.

In the film this lived collective memory and experience is in turn contextualized by the use of archive material, both films and still images which have two main

historical reference points. The first is the founding of the Welfare State after the Second World War. The film opens with an extract from Paul Rotha's documentary *A City Speaks* (1947) which was set in Manchester and is suffused with a sense for a new hopeful politics for reform. This material provides a poignant counterpoint to the contemporary context in which those hopes have been betrayed as neo-liberal capitalism dismantles and privatizes the Welfare State. The same historical reference point is also central to Ken Loach's film *Spirit of '45* (2013) which also draws on archival material to explore a specific moment out of which the founding of the Welfare State emerged. The film is an important testament to the power of collectives to come together and build things in the interests of the majority. Our film explores the difficulty of piecing together that shattered spirit of hope and achievement in the contemporary context.

The second historical reference point is of course the historical moment in which Engels wrote his book, the 1840s. Engels has little place within the official memorialization practices of Manchester and Salford where he has been who obliterated from local history. We did find a block of flats named after him in Salford but few of the residents we asked there knew who he was. This is indicative of an education system that is uninterested in working class history. One of the things we do in the film is to link what is happening in the process of theatrical production to what is happening in the world outside, by asking people to read passages from Engels' book and comment on what those words mean, if anything, to them. What we found is people were able to relate to his analysis of life in the 1840s and make connections between then and now. The film is partly constructed around making links between themes and issues which are occurring in the rehearsals and the responses of other people to Engels' text. The film also references the 1840s through the use of still images from that period which are then cut against contemporary images. For example, stills of factories from the 1840s are cross-dissolved to the *chi chi* apartment blocks built inside the old industrial buildings. Visually this conveys both the displacement of the working class from their former sites of production and the imposition of middle class ways of living and norms over the landscape of city. At this point, Saira, a member of the Ragged Collective talks about how the project is a recovery of a collective

memory that will not be preserved by the corporate and state media. Although the film has a broad narrative structure insofar as it tracks the progress of the theatrical project from its beginnings to the first night performance, it also has a looseness and flexibility in its structure that allows it to make many points of connection in historical time and space. For example, in one sequence we cut from the rehearsals where a dramatic sketch is being constructed around the 1842 Chartist strikes in the Manchester region and the use of the law to break up protests and strikes. This theatrical scene uses the device of historical anachronism in the same way that Peter Watkins has often done (*Culloden, La Commune*) by having the 1842 events reported on by a television station (the Bourgeois Broadcasting Corporation). A reporter interviews Engels at the scene (a slight liberty as Engels was not in England in 1842!) and he quotes a line from his book: 'The working man knows too well, has learned from too-oft repeated experience, that the law is a rod which the bourgeois has prepared for him' (Engels 2005: 235). This is then intercut with archival footage from a 1914 propaganda film called *Our Friends The Police* and contemporary footage of the police at demonstrations plus an interview with a female activist who has been arrested several times for peaceful protests against austerity cuts and who has a trial forthcoming. The law continues to be a rod.



A still from the propaganda film *Our Friends the Police* (1914)

The film moves towards an open-ended conclusion with the actors preparing for the first night performance. In terms of a 'structure of feeling' the film balances

between the achievements of the group, their determination and creativity which they demonstrated to make the show happen and the poignancy that the wider world still remains hostile to making that achievement a more general condition. Thus the final interview with cast member Faye, hears her talking about wanting to get into acting but not having the contacts, the initial opportunities or the economic support to wait around for jobs to come in over a long period of time (as middle class actors do). Her only options are to continue in retail or go into teaching drama. As a young working class woman, few doors will open for Faye in an industry notoriously dominated by the middle class. This domination is reproduced across the cultural industries (and beyond), such as film, television and even music, which was once one of the few industries open to working class talent). The film ends on both something of a triumphant note, with audiences responding to the play in glowing terms during the credit sequence, but at the same time, this micro-cultural project stands metaphorically for a wider political project that has yet to commence.

For more information on the film see: www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info

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Biography

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