



Mike Savage

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We need to talk more about class

*The UK is a divided nation where feelings of class antagonism and injustice run deep. But whereas the left struggles to address these feelings, the populist right has no such difficulty. Ten years on from the publication of "Social Class in the 21st Century", **Mike Savage** asks: do we need a new politics of class? If so, how do we need to rethink class to recognise 21st century inequalities?*

In the UK, as in many rich nations, public and academic discussions about social class have entered an unprecedented phase. As legions of historians have insisted, appealing to the *working class* has historically been a mobilising tool of the political left, with the Labour movement in the UK coming into prominence during the 20th century as a vehicle to mobilise working class interests. To be sure, there was uncertainty, sometimes descending into animosity, about what this entailed, both in deciding who the working class actually were, and deciding what kind of political programme was in its best interest. And yet, for all their bitter disputes, Marxists, Social Democrats, Fabians, as well as radicals and liberals of various hues were in no doubt about one thing: *class mattered!*

Who is talking about class these days? Today's Labour Government, elected with the second largest majority in its history, stumbles to know how to handle its proud historical roots. Bland and vague references to "working people" – the definition of which is largely opaque – have nearly entirely eclipsed references to the "working class", even if Kier Starmer's repeated messaging that he is the son a tool-maker suggests that he still wants to show off working class credentials. And indeed, **sociologists have shown that this is part of a wider pattern** where it is now middle class professionals who claim – often highly unconvincingly – working class roots. Thus the leader of the Conservative Party, Kemi Badenoch, brought up by well-heeled academic parents, has claimed that a brief stint working at McDonalds qualifies her to be working class.



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It may be therefore tempting to view “class talk” as little more than a parlour game of the rich and privileged. In actual fact, however, the realities of class are not hard to find on the ground. In a [recent paper](#) with Mark Fransham, Sacha Hilhorst, Insa Koch and Aaron Reeves, we show how the experiences of working-class communities are scarred by class, with residents routinely talking about the endemic corruption of the political establishment, reminiscent of [early 19th century radical attacks](#) on “Old Corruption”. We should therefore be in doubt that in the deeply divided nation that Britain is today, visceral and often passionate feelings of class antagonism and injustice run deep.

But whereas the left struggles to know how to address these feelings, the populist right has no such difficulty. Much of its appeal involves pitching against privileged elites, whether this be “woke” professionals or out-of-touch and corrupt politicians. This also allows them to mobilise [racist and anti-immigrant sentiment](#) through painting multiculturalism as some kind of middle-class elite project. What, then, is going on?

The desire to discuss social class is alive and well

We can get some clues by reflecting on the lessons of the [Great British Class Survey \(GBCS\)](#), launched by the BBC in 2011 with a huge media blitz encouraging Britons to complete an online survey on their economic, social, and cultural capital. 166,000 people responded to this invitation within a few weeks.

Drawing inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu, our aim was to conceptualise social class as a crystallisation of economic, social and cultural capital and we applied latent class analysis to this small national survey to delineate the underlying patterns in our complex data set. In a highly controversial paper – still highly read 12 years later – [we identified seven classes](#) as a useful heuristic tool to identify the central cleavages of contemporary British society. The BBC, for its part, led expertly-crafted efforts to publicise these seven classes, timed to coincide with the publication of the academic article. Aided by the deft use of an interactive [class calculator](#) that could be easily shared on social media, the story gathered huge public interest, with [over 7 million people](#) clicking a few responses to see which class they had been placed in.

As we later wrote in our best-selling book, [Social Class in the 21st Century](#), the biggest lesson to be learned was that many British people want to talk about class – and relished the opportunity to

engage with public arguments about it. Of course, this interest was itself uneven. As Lisa McKenzie showed, people from the most disadvantaged “precariat” felt stigmatised and looked down upon, so largely ignored the GBCS, whereas the chattering professional and managerial classes responded in their droves – albeit often critically, and sometimes dismissively.

How to revitalise discussions of class in 21st Century Britain

This latter point speaks to the urgent need to re-position our understanding of class to unravel 21st century class inequalities.

The historical politics of class which lay behind the Labour movement’s 20th century power lay in an occupational model. Specifically, it was based on the fundamental divide between the manual jobs of the working class and the non-manual jobs of the middle class. In the later decades of the 20th century, more sophisticated occupational models were developed, and have been incorporated in UK’s official statistics through the [National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification](#).

But the GBCS showed that this old occupational model of class, forged during Britain’s industrial heyday 150 years ago, does not capture fundamental class divides today. De-industrialisation, the rise of the gig economy, the down-skilling of many white-collar jobs, and the pulling away of professional and managerial elites have all played their part. What the GBCS helped to point to, but what has become even more evident in recent years, is that class is now far more anchored in [intense wealth divides](#) that have opened up as private wealth stocks have boomed. In a recent [paper](#) with Nora Waitkus and Maren Toft, we have laid out how to forge an analysis of class which treats wealth divides as the central driver of 21st century class inequality.



Rather than a divide between the manual vs non-manual jobs... class is now far more anchored in the intense wealth divides that have opened up as private wealth stocks have boomed



Perhaps such an approach to class chimes with readers of this blog. Young people will not need reminding that their prospects of buying a house, getting assistance to pay their university fees, and gaining work experience will critically depend on whether they can call on the “Bank of Mum and Dad”. Older people will have a keen sense as to whether their retirement will be gracefully eased by

the rewards of a large private pension pot or whether they will need to make do on the state pension. These divides are huge: nearly half of Britons have little or no private wealth and are left juggling debts in a desperate attempt to make ends meet. By contrast, nearly 60% of private wealth is held by the top 10% of the population who can enjoy luxuries unprecedented in human history.

Today we need a politics of class that places these wealth divides front and centre – and one which challenges the justice of these wealth extremes. This requires careful framing. Since private wealth is increasingly necessary to get by, pitching against wealth in general may be a **tactical mistake**. Perhaps the most promising approach is to return to a community centred perspective which insists that wealth is a collective and social creation and that it is **unfair** for private individuals to lay claim to its **entire rewards**. This requires bold campaigning which is prepared to **stand up to wealthy oligarchs and plutocrats**. For these reasons, both recognising and challenging class inequalities at their root is a precondition for advancing public, democratic, and civic life in 2025 and beyond.

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About the author

Mike Savage

Mike Savage is Martin White Professor of Sociology and Wealth, Elites and Tax Justice research programme leader at the International Inequalities Institute at LSE. His most recent books include the co-authored Social Class in the 21st Century, and The Return of Inequality: Social Change and the Weight of History.

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