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## The rich, the rich, we've got to get rid of the rich

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# The rich, the rich, we've got to get rid of the rich

Lisa Mckenzie

*This is the chant of 1500 protesters marching across Tower Bridge in London on a very wet and very cold Saturday afternoon in January. This was the very boisterous and loud section of the 'March for Homes', which started in Shoreditch in east London, led by the Focus E15 campaign – a group of young mothers and their children who were forcibly evicted out of a homeless hostel in 2013. The hostel sits in the shadow of the billion pound developments of the Olympic Park and the Westfield Shopping Centre. The campaign and fight of the Focus E15 mothers is just one example of the terrible and cruel ways that working-class families and young mothers in particular are being treated in austerity Britain. This is the consequence of inequality gone mad, unrestrained markets, and a lack of empathy for those who struggle to survive in a rampant neoliberal campaign for wealth and more wealth to be redistributed upwards. This is my current research: examining what is happening to working class families, and how precarious their lives have become because of the structuring forces of the open market. Drawing upon my previous research in St Ann's in Nottingham, I show how working-class people and their communities have*

*been devalued to such an extent that the land that they live on is worth more*

**W**

*than them.*

WE ARE SITTING in the back yard of a local is full of fear and anxiety but also a certain amount of hedonism: let's make with a group of people who have lived within their means while the sun shines, 'fuck it we might not be here

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staggering distance of this establishment for either all or most of their lives, as have their families, and friends. We are talking about social class, the state of Britain today, and what is happening in the local neighbourhood. Today's discussion centres on a new film being made about the Kray Twins, the notorious East-end gangsters, which is being filmed in the café two doors down from the pub, the murder of a local man who is being buried today, and rich people buying jeans for thousands of pounds because the denim has been allegedly distressed by an endangered species of tiger. Peppered throughout this conversation are personal worries and concerns about the public state of the severity of inequality in Britain today.

Although conversations change daily, the constant is the talk about how difficult it is to make ends meet in London; this conversation never changes, and never ends. The people who I am sat with here in this pub, and have known over the last year, are finding themselves in increasingly precarious positions. They do not know how long they have left in their community, rents are rising and the local council, it seems, are putting more and more pressure upon local people to move out of this part of London and move further east into Essex, or even north as far away as Birmingham and Manchester. The talk in this pub is what will happen to them – will they be allowed to stay in this neighbourhood, and if not what will happen to their relatives, particularly the elderly who have more secure social housing and are more difficult to move. There is constant anxiety about what will happen to their friends and neighbours who they fear will become stranded in the middle of East London amongst the sea of hipsters, the middle-class media types, and the workers from the City, London's financial district – people with whom the Eastenders in this pub have very little in common, people who they don't know, people who don't want to know them. This is a very typical conversation in a very typical local pub in the Eastend. The talk

tomorrow'.

The people who I am sat with in this pub are

who work on building sites in London, who are now sub-contractors which equates to self-employed workers. They work precariously, when there is work they work, when there is not they don't. The women work part-time in the local pubs, or cleaning in the offices of the financial district on their doorstep, all relying at points on the welfare system to top up their rents which are ever-increasing, and working tax credits to top up their hourly rate which is ever-decreasing. Their positions are unstable, leaving them not knowing whether they will be in work, not knowing where they might be living in a year's time, not knowing whether the new round of welfare benefit cuts linked the Government's Austerity measures will finally 'finish them off'. These people are an example of Britain's Precariat, a growing and distinct group of people at the bottom of our society whose lives are becoming increasingly and frighteningly less secure.

Guy Standing (2011) in his book *Precariat*, argues that neoliberal policies and institutional changes are producing growing numbers of people with common enough experiences to be called an emerging class. The Precariat are a group of people across the world living and working precariously, usually in a series of short-term jobs, without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, stable social protection or protective regulations relevant to them. They include migrants but also locals. Guy Standing explains that this class of people are producing new instabilities in society. They are increasingly frustrated and angry but also dangerous because they have no voice, and hence they are vulnerable to the siren calls of extreme political parties. At the same time they are becoming loathed and stigmatised, ridiculed and laughed at for their methods of managing their fear and precariousness. This management of fear comes through closely identifying with the local, tightening their notions of identity through 'who we are' and through compli-

cated and voracious notions of belonging. This manifests in distinct cultural forms: what they like, what they wear, how they speak, and their strong connection to community belonging and values. Consequently, they are seen and known as old fashioned, immovable, rigid and unable to bend to the wishes of a changing, globalised market. The ways in which they dress, speak, walk, and how they raise their families come under scrutiny, and they are devalued. When Britain needs a low paid working class, people to serve coffee, clean hotel rooms, and look after their children, there are 'better' working-class people from Italy, Poland, Nigeria or Brazil which can be enlisted. As Guy Standing argues, this causes globalised precarity and a global Precariat.

This paper introduces the concept of precarity and the fear that arises from the neoliberal condition of never being valued. There is a distinct group of precarious people in the UK, the people at the bottom who are becoming increasingly unstable and fragile. For generations in the UK, we have debated the 'state' of the poorest people: their usefulness, their behaviour, their values and their taste. We have also debated who they are, how we can define them and what we call them. The need for them to be recognisable and definable has always been important. Guy Standing in 2011 was not the first to name this group of people potentially dangerous. There has been a constant anxiety, particularly by the middle-class, regarding the poor, which stretches back to at least 1601 with the introduction of the Poor Law, which was then ramped up in 1834 with the introduction of the revised Poor Law. The Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of the Bishop of London, conducted a detailed survey of the state of poor law administration and prepared a report. This report took the view that poverty was essentially caused by the indigence of individuals rather than economic and social conditions, and if not dealt with, the poor turn into a dangerous and criminal class.

The Royal Commission published its report in March 1834, and made a series of 22 recommendations which were to form the basis of the new legislation that followed in the same year. The subsequent 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act led to a major overhaul of how poor relief was administered, splitting the poor into two distinct groups: the deserving poor, who were deemed respectable, perhaps 'unlucky' and undeserving; and those who were considered deviant, problematic and criminal. How we define the poor without further stigmatising their inequality and adding to the 'dangerous class' rhetoric, is an ongoing issue.

The Precariat is a group of people that has gone by many names in British social history, and has been known and named in many forms. Charles Booth and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, our forefathers in the enquiry of social class, social inequalities, and social policy, used the concepts of 'underclass' and the 'social residuum'. Even Karl Marx was never sure who the poorest in our

society were, how they were to be addressed and what their contribution might be when he wrote about the dangerous lumpen proletariat, the lowly section of the working class who would probably never reach a state of political consciousness, and would even be a hindrance to class struggle, fight and victory.

The British Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s joined forces with the American neoliberal and right-wing social commentator Charles Murray to create their own theory of the ‘underclass’ with ‘the cycle of deprivation’ – the supposed perverse effects of welfare dependency – in order to implement neo-liberal policies by rolling back welfare and State benefits and focusing upon the family rather than the structural or societal causes of inequality. This was a re-working and re-reading of the early work of Oscar Lewis in 1961, who through his research in Mexico City showed how the practices of the poor become named as ‘deficient’ when trying to cope with the everyday stresses that being poor can bring. Lewis noted that some of the poorest people in Mexico City at the time had regular work, but many survived from day to day through a miscellany of unskilled occupations, child labour, pawning personal goods and borrowing from local money lenders at exorbitant rates of interest. According to Lewis, first and foremost they survived because of their local social networks: family, neighbours and friends. Lewis described the social and psychological characteristics of what he calls the ‘culture of poverty’. He also described other characteristics of this poor neighbourhood, which includes being:

*‘... distrustful of the basic institutions of the dominant classes, hatred of the police, and they are aware of middle class values ... but do not live by them.’*

What Lewis was attempting with the ‘culture of poverty’ discourse in the 1960s was examining the value systems that the poorest live within, thus attempting to make sense and contextualising those everyday actions of people with limited choices because of the structure and the inequalities within their society, rather than purely examining the behaviour of the poor and blaming them for their situation.

However, Lewis’s theory of the ‘culture of poverty’ was misused by the British Conservative Government and Charles Murray during the 1980s using Lewis’s schema of the poor to perpetuate the notion that the poor are responsible for their own poverty. This narrative was taken up again during the 1990s with New Labour’s social exclusion policies, and has strengthened under the Cameron Conservatives with the Broken Britain narrative.

The poorest people and the neighbourhoods where they live within the UK have already been established and been conceptualised and known through many modalities, and the definitions constantly shift. Those definitions have led to specific and often negative understandings of the Precariat, and it is

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through those negative namings that there has been growing stigmatisation of the poorest people in the UK. This has manifested itself in the genre of popular television programmes which ‘watch the poor’ in a pseudo-documentary way – a phenomenon recently known as ‘poverty porn’. Programmes like Channel 4’s *Benefit Street*, and the

BBC programme *We Pay Your Benefits* has become an outlet for ‘regular people’ to become angry, and provide someone to blame for the rising inequalities in Britain. These programmes are based on simple but well-used narratives, the benefit-claiming, young, single mother taking too much from the State, or the lazy benefit family with no intention of ever working. These are myths and stories, rather than coherent narratives. In contrast recent and rigorous research by Shildrick, Macdonald et al. (2012) shows that poverty in the UK is caused by the insecure employment market where people move from no-pay to low-pay, zero-hours contracts, and welfare benefits.

And although the picture seems pretty grim at the bottom for the Precariat, who experience low pay or no pay, insecure housing and being known as dangerous. The truth is that it can become even bleaker. This is because disadvantage does not show itself only through lack of material and economic means. Disadvantage can also be culturally pitched, when a group is lacking or is denied the other resources necessary to live a life with dignity, such as respect and being valued. What happens to this group of people who have over at least the last 30 years become known and named as those who have little value, and are of little value?

These are only some of the difficulties the Precariat face in modern Britain through media and political rhetoric which has been used unfairly in representing poor working-class people. Steph Lawler (2008) and Les Back (2002) have both argued that working-class people are rarely taken seriously; however, it is often assumed that they are easily ‘readable’ to middle-class observers. This criticism can also be levelled at the GBCS as it is rarely considered by those who observe working-class people and neighbourhoods that working-class people, and especially the poor working class, the Precariat, can know or understand themselves and can articulate their understandings, perceptions and feelings extremely well (Back 2002; Lawler 2008).

Unfair and mean representations of poor working-class people, and the places where they live, are everywhere in the UK and have been documented in the work of Skeggs (1997, 2004, 2009), Nayak (2009), Lawler (2002, 2008), Reay (2000, 2002, 2004), Haylett (2000, 2001, 2003), Munt (2000) and Sibley (1995). Lawler (2008) argues that working-class people are rarely named as class subjects but are often known and reproduced as ‘disgusting subjects’, usually through targeting descriptions of bodies and clothing (shell suits and large gold earrings, for instance), which are often used as shorthand descriptions in recognising working-class people. On the social networking site Facebook there is a facility where you can send ‘council estate gifts’ to your friends. The most popular council estate gift

is an image of a group of young people in sportswear titled ‘mob of chav scum’: 824,000 people have sent this ‘gift’ to their friends on the site. The next most popular are images titled ‘a piss stained phone box’, and ‘a run-down community centre’. There are other ‘council estate gifts’ such as ‘over-the-top Christmas lights’, and ‘balcony draped with washing’. Lawler (2008) argues that cultural references can invoke signifiers, which do a great deal of work in coding a way of life which has been deemed valueless and repulsive. Bodies, their appearance, their bearing and their adornment, are also central to coding the poor, and when those codes are joined up with living space and in particular

the term 'council estate', the reader or the viewer are left to 'join up the dots of pathologisation' in order to see and understand the picture: that certain ways of dressing and speaking, and living in certain places indicate a despised 'class position but also an underlying pathology' (Lawler, 2008, p.133; Skeggs, 2004, p.37). This underlying pathology that Lawler (2008) and Skeggs (2004) uncover is also about taste, or the lack of it. They use the work of Pierre Bourdieu to argue that those with the most power get to decide what cultural resources are tasteful regarding ways of dressing, personal styling, music, art, speaking and social pursuits. However, what Bourdieu (1986) argues is that, while the culture of the middle class is deemed legitimate and tasteful, it is the culture of the working class which is lacking in 'taste' and illegitimate. Lawler (2008) and Skeggs (2004) transport this argument further by exclaiming that the cultural practices of the working class are not only 'tasteless', but are also pathologised; coded as immoral, wrong and criminal.

### **Precarious and valueless**

In 2013, I became part of the team working on the Great British Class Survey with the role of finding the Precariat for the purposes of the survey (Savage, 2015). This distinct group were underrepresented in the Great British Class Survey as they did not take the online survey in any significant numbers. It appears that the class calculator on the BBC website was also not taken by the Precariat unlike the Elite class, who found the experience flattering, interesting and fun. This is hardly surprising, as the other chapters in this book have shown that the survey was used by other groups as a way of confidently self-expressing their cultural knowledge and their superiority. The Precariat are placed at the bottom, and no one wants to come last, so it was expected that this group would not be as visible to the GBCS as other groups.

My part in the survey team was to try to understand more deeply why this group had not engaged in the original survey but also what they thought about the survey, and how they were positioned within it. I was brought into the team because of my previous work relating to mothers who lived on a council estate in Nottingham, and then later work which I had undertaken with a group of young men living on the same council estate who were unemployed.

When it comes to working-class 'taste', I have

always known there are complexities that social surveys and social research have failed to do justice. In the 1950s, Richard Hoggart in his book *The uses of literacy* critiqued how the working-classes were becoming sentimentalised in and through popular media. This, he argued, did a great injustice to those who suffered under unfair structural social systems. Hoggart pointed out that the pain and emotional hardships of material inequality which are manifested through cultural practice were seldom captured through research.

Consequently, I decided to use the GBCS as a tool in a more qualitative ethnographic way by doing the survey with my respondents and by also noting what they thought of the survey as we did it. I took the class survey in paper form to some of the respondents who had been part of my previous research in Nottingham, and to some of the respondents in my current research in East London.

One of the groups I met up with were women who were connected with a drop-in centre for street prostitutes in Nottingham. I had strong connections with the women which I had built up over many years, and we spent the afternoon 'doing the GBCS' together as a group. The GBCS proved to be a great tool and opened up many hours of discussion and laughter about 'us' what 'we like to do', and 'them' and why 'they' do what 'they do'.

The women from Nottingham were undoubtedly in a precarious position; their lives were filled with insecurities, from where they might get their next meal, to where they would be living next week. However, some of the women had some security – they had council tenancies so they knew at least for now they were 'safe'. However, all of the women never doubted for one minute where they might be placed within this survey. When I asked which class they thought they might be in, in unison they shouted 'at the bottom'.

I later did a similar activity with a group of men in the pub in East London. Their reaction to the questions directly asking about 'class' were very different. Initially, they thought I was 'out of order' for thinking they were in any social class, though they knew what I was 'getting at'. However, they relented to saying that, although they hadn't really thought about it and didn't really care, they were probably 'somewhere in the middle'. There was a clear pattern between men and women; women had no doubts or illusions where in society they were situated, while the men were more resistant about where they thought they were situated.

Richard from Nottingham was 27 and had only been in paid work over the last year and was a building sub-contractor, self-employed and doing whatever work came his way, either as he said through 'word of mouth' or through agency work. He thought he was definitely middle-class, and estimated his earnings at over £50,000 a year. When I asked him to qualify this he told me that one week he had earned almost £700, so he multiplied this by 52. Although he recognised that this was 'a very

good week', he was adamant that 'potentially' that is what he could earn. We did the class calculator which looked at his earnings and the people he knew in his life – Richard knew a wide range of people from DJs which he considered as 'artists' to lawyers who had represented him in court in the past, and university lecturers, which was me. Consequently, his result was 'elite' which he was quite happy about. If he had been 'elite' he might have wanted to tweet his result, however sadly for Richard he was not elite and did not have a Twitter account.

It was this level of interpretation which I most enjoyed about the Great British Class Survey and my group of respondents; they gave thoughtful and interesting answers to the questions and enjoyed thinking about the things they liked, and the things they should



perhaps do more of. Within the survey there is a set of questions which asks about cultural activities with which you engage. My respondents gave wide ranging examples of activities they took part in. When I asked about visiting stately homes, museums, and going to the theatre, my respondents interpreted those questions through what they liked to do. They talked about visiting Madame Tussaud's Waxwork Museum, taking their children to the Dr Who Museum in Blackpool, and going to see the live shows for Mrs Brown's Boys, a popular BBC comedy about a working-class Irish family. As they talked to me about these activities which they enjoyed, I imagined the sniggers and wry smiles from those with enough cultural capital to know this was not what we were really asking, and that they had 'got it wrong'. They talked about going to 'real' museums as children when they were at school; they reminisced about their school trips to stately homes and to local museums. However, these were not activities that they continued to do as adults, these were childhood memories of 'the school trip'.

What was striking within this section of the survey, was that they knew that they were getting it wrong, and they knew what I was really asking in terms of class, culture and value. However, they explained that humour, community and collectivism, and most of all fun, was what was really important to them. Going on day trips with family, or as in the East London group, the coach trips from the pub to the Kent Coast, was what my respondents valued. They knew these were not valued cultural pursuits, and couldn't really understand why liking the opera 'got you more points' than liking Mrs Brown's Boys, to them one was funny and one was boring.

I have been asked many times over the years by people in my community, my friends and neighbours who suspect that I might know something about these matters, why are some things more valued than others? And why are other things de-valued even though you like them? One of the most common questions women ask in my research is about the way they dress, and why they are 'looked down on' for wearing big hooped gold earrings, and why women on television shows are represented in a particular way: pony tails, track suits and wearing

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loads of gold when the storyline wants to show quickly how 'common' the character is. In all honesty and if I think rationally, I do not know why one arbitrary style is valued over another arbitrary style, apart from the fact that distinct people look, like and dress that way.

This is the cultural element to being the Precariat, and is as significant to class inequality as the economic material forces which produce it. Bev Skeggs (2005) has argued that the consequences of stigmatisation, and re-branding the poor working class as valueless, have been central in producing new ways of exploitation through the fields of culture and media, inventing new forms of class differentiation which are being produced through processes of what Pierre Bourdieu would term symbolic violence.

Being a person of value is important. Why else would some groups proudly tweet their class status, while others know already where they will be placed? Nevertheless, that does not mean that this group of people are not proud of who they are; they tell me constantly they are proud of their communities and families, and the adversities they recognise from being positioned where they are. Enduring hardship

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is always listed as a personal achievement. They know they are ‘looked down on’ and ridiculed, which is why they say they would rather stay among ‘their own’. It was always more important to this group of people to be liked and respected within their own community and from among people like them, which makes the instability and the precariousness of the Precariat the most cruel. Their resilience and resistance are misrecognised as crassness, their protection of their profiles is known as ‘bad taste’, and their sense of communitarianism is seen as ‘bad judgement’ and rigidity. Although the Precariat are highly visible with their ‘bad taste’, the rationale behind their practice, and the value they have remains invisible.

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