

‘Flat-capping it’: Memory, nostalgia and value in retroactive male working-class identification

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Abstract

The article contends that working-class identities in Britain today are increasingly positioned as ‘valueless’. Emerging from empirical research with students and staff from working-class backgrounds based in higher education institutions, the article explores how some of the male participants in the project continue to identify in class-based terms. Arguing that a tendency to dwell on the past has opened up the possibility of a ‘valuable’ identification for these participants in the present, the article focuses on the critical dimensions of nostalgia and collective memory by exploring two particular kinds of ‘mnemonic imagination’ (Keightley and Pickering, 2012; Pickering and Keightley, 2013): ‘flat-capping it’ and ‘family folklore’. Far from being regressive, it is concluded that a recourse to the past in this particular context can be seen as a retroactive strategy, which enables the negotiation of gendered working-class subjectivities in the present, as well as providing a critical perspective on the future for those whose classed identities are so often rendered as ‘valueless’.

Key words: Social class, gender, nostalgia, collective memory, value, identification, retroactivity.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man [sic] singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. (Benjamin, 1999:247)

“Why have working-class people gone from being the salt of the earth to the scum of the earth?” (Joe, Open Book)

Introduction

The article begins from the premise that working-class identification in Britain has been fundamentally constrained in recent years. The working-class body has historically been ‘mis-recognized in order to be denied recognition’ (Skeggs, 2004:181) and a set of wider contemporary discourses continue this dubious tradition today, as popular representations of the working classes in Britain increasingly favour a focus on the ‘valueless’ (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), crystallized in the figure of the ‘chav’ (Tyler, 2008; Tyler & Bennett, 2010) or the mythologized ‘benefit scrounger’, so-beloved of the tabloid press.¹ As Pat (Open Book) notes, “working-class kids” are “demonised into becoming a sort of floating reserve army of labour which offers various different threats, you know knife crime and all the rest”.

In tandem with this tendency, the importance of class in shaping people’s lives has also been refuted. In academic circles, class has been pronounced ‘dead’ (Pakulski and Walters, 1996) by some and, as such, any talk of the resurrection of class is dismissed by certain theorists of individualization, since class can surely now only be discussed as a ‘zombie category’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In terms of the presence of social class in governmental discourses, the language of the New Labour government post-1997 saw terms such as ‘social exclusion’ begin to replace the traditional industrial language of class; this has arguably enabled the state to abdicate responsibility for inequality through the pathologization of a ‘moral underclass’ (Skeggs, 2004, following Levitas), reminiscent of historical narratives of an ‘undeserving poor’ (see Steedman, 2000). Such terminology

persists in the contemporary political landscape, for example, in Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke's analysis (2011) of the 2011 riots in the United Kingdom, where he refers to a 'feral underclass'. If historically the working classes have been misrecognized, then increasingly they are now recognized only in terms of lack (Charlesworth, 2000; Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2005; Walkerdine, 1997). How, then, might *valuable* classed identities be constructed in the face of such challenges?

The article considers how some of the male participants in my research have fashioned class-based identities for themselves in the present, through recourse to the past. The gendered nature of the strategies discussed here is significant: as Skeggs (1997:74) notes, men may be able to use their classed identity as a 'resource', or as a means of 'including themselves in a positively valorized social category', yet this is a possibility not always open to women. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which class and gender intersect, as this intersection might have the effect of either enabling or constraining identification depending on a subject's complex social positioning.

The article emerges from a wider project that explored the limits of working-class identification in English universities. Twenty-nine participants were interviewed based upon my knowledge of their class background (in the case of existing acquaintances), or on their own self-definition as being from 'working-class backgrounds' - an appropriate method of selection since the research was concerned with the subjective experience of social class and not with objective definitions. While the participants were all well-educated and some were employed in high-status academic positions, the research was interested in reflecting on the enduring cultural aspects of class *background*, particularly as entry to the field of higher education (HE) in Britain continues to be highly classed.² By virtue of their engagement in HE, students and academics are often assumed to be pursuing middle-class identities through their accrual of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), yet I argue that such an assumption obscures the complex operation of social class beyond objective measures such as employment type, as well as the ambivalence inherent in movement across classed social fields.

The impetus to the research was my professional involvement with the Open Book Project – an initiative currently based in four HE institutions in London and the southeast of England, and designed to broaden access to HE for under-represented groups. The research was subsequently expanded to include non-Open Book students and a number of academics working in social science/humanities departments in universities around England. All of the participants featured in this article are male (although both genders were represented in the wider project), White British and aged between approximately 35 and 55 years; apart from Dave, they were also all known to me prior to the commencement of the research.

Due to several years spent working with Open Book, I was considered by the group as a kind of 'insider participant observer' (Laboree, 2002). One of the advantages of 'insider' research is that a continuous dialogue has now been established with the participants, meaning that the research process is never definitively completed; indeed, I have recently been in further conversation with Joe, Neil and Steve. However, there are some drawbacks to the 'insider' approach, not least the quandary of 'privileged eavesdropping' (Burke, 1989). Thus, narrative interviews were used as the primary method – rather than ethnography – so as to allay these concerns and widen the scope of the research, although insights from participant observation, particularly with Open Book, have enriched the interview data.

The article begins by foregrounding the concept of class and what I see as the 'predicament' of class-based identification in contemporary society. I then move on to briefly introduce the concept of nostalgia before examining two particular types of 'mnemonic imagination' (Keightley and Pickering, 2012; Pickering and Keightley 2013): 'flat-capping it' and 'family folklore'. I draw on the concept of 'mnemonic imagination' for two reasons: firstly, to emphasize the inventive and creative dimensions

of 'remembrance' as illustrated by the narratives that I document here; and secondly, to link the individual, personal strategies of 'flat-capping it' and 'family folklore' to wider, collective social processes, as suggested by Keightley and Pickering (2012: 2). I conclude the article by considering how dwelling on the past may in fact provide some of the male participants here with a positive orientation to the future.

(Dis)identification and social class

The wider project on which this article is based was concerned with the narrative production of class-based identities. I conceptualize social class as being profoundly relational and antagonistic. While I foreground the concept of 'struggle' (Skeggs, 2010) in line with a Marxist understanding of class, I also understand class as operating beyond the economic, incorporating the cultural, affective and psychic domains, many of whose processes are fundamentally immaterial in nature. As such, I focus here on the cultural dimensions of subjective class-based identities (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Savage, 2000, 2003; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Skeggs et al. 2008), as understood by those who experience them, through the prism of memory. As already noted, not all agree that social class continues to be a useful way of examining inequality in an alleged era of increased individualization and reflexivity (see for example Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Yet Savage (2003) contends that such approaches have in fact stimulated a return to the cultural analysis of class, questioning whether individualization can really be equated with the 'death' of class (Atkinson 2010; Kirk 2002, 2007; Savage 2000; Skeggs et al., 2008).

There is an extensive literature relating to the ambivalence with which many individuals treat their own class positions (Payne & Grew, 2005; Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2001), which contends that many working-class people are reluctant to position themselves in class-based terms. Indeed, the category of 'class' encodes specific historical formations of symbolic value and moral worth (Sayer, 2005), which are highly contingent, and these values are often made explicit in moments of encounter, not least due to the fundamentally relational nature of class (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). The symbolic values ascribed to 'class' so often act to 'pathologize', or to set up the working-class subject as inadequate or valueless (Skeggs, 2004:181); is it any wonder, then, that many will actively choose to disidentify from such valueless subject-positions?

Žižek (2000:103) notes that ideology, far from providing subjects with 'a firm identification,' may conversely create a 'false disidentification', or 'false distance towards the actual co-ordinates of those subjects' social existence'. The ideological devaluation of the working classes in contemporary British society has led, in some cases, to such a 'false disidentification', even when the material conditions of subjects' existence are indicative of class inequality, or when circuits of valuation continue to situate the working classes as 'lacking' (Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2005).

I argue that a refusal to recognise social class as a structuring principle of subjectivity, or the failure to legitimate such an identity through circuits of differential valorisation, has created a predicament of identification for the participants here. I examine below the ways in which some of the male participants in this project have begun to draw on the past as a means of negotiating this predicament.

Situating nostalgia

Olick and Robbins note that: 'Memory is a central...medium through which identities are constituted' (1998:133) and I turn now to the concept of 'collective memory', as originally conceived by Halbwachs (1992) (see also Assman, 1995), in order to explore contemporary working-class

identification. While his use of the Durkheimian notion of the 'collective' has been problematized (Olick and Robbins, 1998:111), Halbwachs's theorisation of the social aspect of memory continues to be influential today, as evidenced by the burgeoning field of 'memory studies'.³ Jedlowski describes collective memory as 'a set of *social representations concerning the past* which each group produces, institutionalizes, guards and transmits through the interaction of its members' (2001:33; *emphasis in original*). While the memories articulated during the narrative telling of life stories may ostensibly be individual in nature, I am interested here in linking individual narrative stories to collective forms of remembrance. My time spent with Open Book participants suggested to me that the past had a key role in the articulation of their current classed identities. Storytelling was a regular feature of conversation, involving a kind of tacit appreciation of a shared cultural history. While the strategies of remembrance documented here are certainly *individual*, I refer to the concept of *collective* memory to underscore the emplacement of these forms of 'mnemonic imagination' (Keightley and Pickering 2012; Pickering and Keightley, 2013) within wider social contexts; that is, these strategies are only rendered comprehensible as they speak to a shared vocabulary and refer back to a common set of cultural reference points. Remembrance also incorporates 'bodily practices' (Connerton, 1989), an understanding compatible with Nora's (1989) concept of 'true memory', as well as Bourdieu's habitus as 'embodied history' (1990:56). Following Pickering and Keightley (2013), I also understand the 'transmission' of memory as taking place 'in time', as well as 'through time'.

I am arguing that the particular form of remembrance explored here should be considered as nostalgic, in that it is closely tied to feelings of loss (Pickering and Keightley, 2006) and longing. For Boym (2001:xiii):

Nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is the longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.

Arguably, this romanticism has resulted in nostalgia being viewed negatively: as a 'poisoned itch' (Lessing, cited by Atia and Davis, 2010:181); as the 'conceptual opposite of progress' (see Pickering and Keightley, 2006:919); as 'history without guilt' (Kammen, 1993:688); and as 'regressive' (see Moran, 2002:156). Indeed, if recollection appears to be at all nostalgic, then it may open itself up to critique (see, for example, Walkerdine, 2010:93). It is quite right to acknowledge the potential for nostalgia to be mobilized to more sinister ends, for example in nationalist discourses (Boym, 2001; Gilroy, 2004, cf. Bonnett, 2010). The participants did not straightforwardly view nostalgia as positive; for example, Dick – a professor of criminology in his fifties – dismisses nostalgia as purely "romantic" and Dave – a lecturer in his forties from the north east of England – avoids looking through "rose-tinted spectacles". Even Steve – who is discussed at length below – warns against "the chocolate and roses version of the working class as angelic". Nostalgia, then, can be imagined as a distortion of 'true' memory and is thus implicitly considered as a perversion of the past as historical fact.

Yet despite this, nostalgia is currently seeing something of a renaissance in contemporary literature (Atia & Davies, 2010; Bonnett, 2010; Boym, 2001; Keightley and Pickering, 2012; Pickering & Keightley, 2006; Radstone, 2010; Strangleman, 2012) and much of this literature argues for the reconsideration of nostalgia as 'radical' (Bonnett 2010), or as having a 'critical potential' (Atia & Davies, 2010:181). I argue here that the explicit recourse to collective memory by certain male participants in my research has resulted in the flowering of a nostalgic relationship to an industrialized past (see also Strangleman, 2012). However, in this particular context I suggest that this type of remembrance is a *critical* arena in which identification takes place – or a type of retroactive strategy – as opposed to mere regression. It is important to make this distinction as an uncritical regression could endorse the more unsavoury aspects of the industrial past; Joe (Open Book), for example, lambasts the sexist, racist, and homophobic attitudes that he had witnessed as a

younger man growing up in southeast London. If conceptualized in retroactive terms, then nostalgic memory acts as a form of critique, which ‘defetishiz[es] the existing’ (Jedlowski, 2001:36) rather than endorsing the regressive, and contributes to an analysis of the possibilities – and predicaments - of class-based identification for the participants presented here.

Neil is an Open Book employee, born in southeast London in 1962. At the time of research he was completing a master’s degree in Creative Writing. In our interview, he explains “I’m not sure anybody knows where they fit in anymore”. Indeed, many of the participants described themselves as ‘in-between’ although this does not imply that the participants were necessarily moving towards a more circumscribed class position, but their movement across different classed social fields has certainly complicated their ability to ‘fit in’. Neil’s phrasing here suggests a kind of permanent state of liminality, but also alludes to a previous mythical time in which everybody knew their place. As Boym (2001:8) notes: ‘Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values’. If melancholy is ‘mourning without end’ (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003:3), then Boym’s definition of nostalgia might be reconceptualised as melancholic rather than mournful: return is ‘impossible’, so there can be no ‘end’ to mourning. If nostalgia is conceived of as ‘transitional’ (Radstone, 2010:188), then this is not in the straightforward sense of a phase in the ‘progress’ between one time and another (or indeed between one social class and another in this context), but in the sense of a kind of liminality which questions accepted notions of teleological history, as well as steadfast distinctions between spatiality and temporality.

Particularly for the Open Book participants, the impulse to collectively reminisce may be understood as a type of ‘reflective nostalgia’, which ‘lingers in ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time’ (Boym, 2001:41). Joe is the founder and coordinator of Open Book. He was born in 1962 and raised in Bermondsey and Deptford, southeast London. The ‘dignity’ of working-class experience began to be undermined, for Joe, by the Conservative government in the 1980s. While class is undoubtedly ‘a system for limiting freedom’ (Sennett and Cobb, 1972:28), for many of the male participants in Open Book there was previously a type of dignity derived from the involvement in a culture of work that fostered the idea of a collective working-class consciousness. For example, both Joe and Neil worked in the printing industry in London during the 1980s, while Jimmy – aged in his late fifties - worked on the docks in a Scottish port as a youth. It is significant that a tendency to reminiscence is more characteristic of *male* responses: the forms of nostalgic remembrance documented here are not found in the women’s narratives in the wider project. In part this could be due to the gendered nature of participation in industrial forms of labour, yet I argue that the way in which the participants were able to think about their identities was also strongly gendered. Whereas the men sought to actively construct for themselves valuable class-based identities, the women were more likely to have felt shame at being identified as ‘working class’, a phenomenon likely to prompt ambivalence towards their classed pasts, or even attempts to dis-identify in the case of Lisa, a PhD student in her thirties (see also Skeggs, 1997).

Material deprivation, pernicious judgment and social discrimination based on class division continue in contemporary society, yet the type of ‘dignity’ invoked by Joe above is routinely denied to those who are now positioned as ‘valueless’ (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). As Joe explains:

“...class still exists [...] Working-class people don’t want to see their selves as working-class, working-class people want to have a look at people who they see as being under them, as underclass [...] It’s more important now I think, than it’s ever been, even before when people was aware of their class, when there was a class consciousness [...] there needs to be some way to try and instil in people a sense of collective responsibility [...] a sense of some sort of collective psyche if you want, of belonging to something.”

Yet while Joe notes the type of ‘disidentification’ discussed above, Joe clearly *does* identify himself in class-based terms and this was true for all of the Open Book participants, as well as a number of the non-Open Book participants. There is a disjuncture, then, between the lived realities of social class and the type of discourses – popular, political or academic – which disavow the continued importance of class in limiting and constraining people’s expectations and chances in contemporary society.

For Joe, there used to be “a commonality of grievance, a commonality of experience, but also a commonality of injustice” in the past and this was derived from work and trade union membership. His reflection on the class consciousness of another era, a memory anchored in both individual experience and collective remembrance, is then contrasted with his belief that coherent working-class identities have “disappeared” in the present. Below I consider the case of Steve, a slightly younger participant, who has nonetheless taken recourse to collective memory in order to situate himself in the present.

Flat-caps and ghost whippets

Many of the male Open Book participants, such as Joe and Neil, have direct experience of work in industries such as printing, as well as industrial action; Neil for example was involved in the Wapping Printers’ Strike of 1986, and also supported the Miners’ Strike in 1984. Nostalgic reminiscence for this group, then, has its basis in (although does not exclusively draw upon) the lived experience of their pasts. However, the nostalgic invocation of a classed past may also occur in those who are not quite old enough to have experienced some of the key markers of working-class life before de-industrialisation in Britain. I argue that when this is the case, certain signs of working-class culture might be re-enacted in the present to represent markers of anachronistic working-class culture.

Steve was born a decade after Joe and Neil in 1972. He grew up in the Calder Valley in the north of England in what he describes as the “vapour trail or ruins of historical progress”. At the time of our first interview, he was a lecturer in an art college and was also doing a PhD; he is currently working for the University and Colleges’ Union (UCU). Steve’s story was particularly interesting to me in that while he was younger than most of the Open Book participants, class still seemed fundamental to his sense of self. We discuss in our interview my interest in nostalgic working-class identity and he explains:

“I think I possibly am ‘guilty’ if that’s possible, of retroactive class construction in the sense that I do cling to or re-construct my working-classness in a supposed middle class job...I have taken on the union thing my dad did - I’m union secretary where I work - at the point when my dad is totally disillusioned and getting quite cranky and right wing in his old age.”

Narratives across the wider project emphasized the importance of language in *classification*: accent, for example, continues to be an important way of identifying social class background in contemporary Britain. Steve’s classed identity is characterised by particular kinds of performance, enacted at work, including a specific usage of language. He explains how, along with colleagues from similar class backgrounds, he uses “old Yorkshire nonsense” in his speech, and that this is designed to confound those not familiar with the dialect. He explains: “I learned this kind of dialect, and words like ‘puddled’,⁴ from my father and great grandfather, who spoke with all of the thees and thaas and thines of a community steeped in Methodism.” According to Steve, using “class-based prank stuff” in his lecturing job “makes it tolerable”, yet while invoking this kind of language is playful, Steve also concedes how his behaviour stems from “resentment”. These types of defiant performances see the refusal of Steve, as a man from a working-class background, to assimilate into accepted forms of middle-class practice and comportment, but they also highlight the limitations

inherent in the performance of working-class identity in the present. Devaluation arguably halts the contemporaneous formation of classed identities. Thus, when Steve wishes to assert his class-based identity, he refers *back* to another time and place where his class would have afforded him a degree of respectability. While his mobilization of the past does not necessarily pivot on his own lived experience – “th’art puddled” being rooted in the histories of his older relatives - it is nonetheless one that affords him the possibility of pride through identification, as well as being a demand for recognition.

A year after our initial interview, Steve contacts me to provide a written update on his life, particularly his involvement as trade union branch secretary in the nation-wide UCU strike of 24th March 2011. He details a telephone call with a colleague who will join him on the picket line; this colleague, giggling, asks Steve if she and her friend “can borrow some flat caps”,⁵ before apologizing: “Sorry we’re awful aren’t we? Any opportunity to wind you up [tease you]. We can always see your spiritual whippet”.⁶ Steve explains how on the picket line the following day, two further colleagues mention his “ghost whippet” and each time this happens, Steve pretends to ‘pat’ his invisible dog. Far from the ‘zombie’ evoked by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), the phantom of the whippet – while undeniably playful - signifies the trace of an active classed past, ‘haunting’ the present (see Gordon, 2008) and influencing Steve’s capacity to situate himself within wider contemporary social structures. Steve eloquently writes: “Sometimes I conjure it up, sometimes it is conjured up by others, sometimes it arrives unbidden and unwanted, but the ghost whippet is both real and fictional, it flickers in and out of the fabric of social life.” In this sense, what Steve describes as a “mascot” relies upon the way in which he performs his own classed identity, as well as the performativity that occurs when others name him, through the invocation of the specter.

The forms of performance discussed above are characterised by Steve as: “flat-capping it”. While Steve does actually wear a flat cap, the notion of *flat-capping it* is also a wry comment on his invocation of symbols from a mythologized working-class collective history, one which does not necessarily draw on first-hand experience. ‘Flat-capping it’ is also based on the fundamental relationality of social class. One response to being ashamed of the negative valuation associated with being recognized as ‘working class’ is attempting to gain respectability on the terms of the dominant (Skeggs 1997), and this may involve disidentification from ‘valueless’ subject positions, a response which is more characteristic of women’s experiences than men’s, as I have already noted. ‘Flat-capping it’ is the obverse response to this judgmental gaze, in that it aims to challenge the normative values of a middle-class field by interrupting the type of behaviour that is (mis)recognized as valuable in the university milieu; this type of performance operates *against* - rather than in conjunction with - accepted norms and can be seen as one way of conveying masculinized, working-class identities in the present, or in what Benjamin terms ‘a moment of danger’ (1999:247).

I would like to argue that nostalgic relationships to history problematize the very conceptualization of history as teleological progress (see also Boym, 2001:10) by invoking elements of myth and collective memory, and this I explore further below. I am reminded here of Walter Benjamin’s recourse to nostalgia ‘as a revolutionary method for the critique of the present’ (Löwy, 2005:2). Thus, while situating oneself in the present through the prism of the past is easily dismissed as a romantic yearning for the days of yore, nostalgia has the capacity to perform a critical function in the present beyond that of mere retrogression.

Family folklore

Recourse to the past pivots on a collective mythology which incorporates various elements of history, lived experience, reminiscence and embodiment. Following Benjamin (1999:247), I am concerned that a ‘danger’ is genuinely threatening both ‘the content of the tradition and those [the

working classes] who inherit it'. It is telling that working-class people find it increasingly difficult to articulate their identities in class-based terms, as the existing literature on class disidentification highlights. Yet, due to the nature of their interaction in the predominantly middle-class environment of the English university, many of the participants here have conversely refused to abandon class-based identification.

I first met Neil when he was running creative writing workshops for Open Book students; he is currently authoring a novel and has also been known to pen eulogies. Neil was the participant most preoccupied by the past, a concern clearly conveyed in his writing and interest in family history. As he explains, he hopes to provide "glimpses of what's always been there and could be there again" in his prose, an aspiration starkly characterised by loss.

The 'paradox' of 'loss' appears to be that it begs to be acknowledged yet can only be marked by its very nature as absent (Butler, 2003:467). Indeed, I have been arguing that the devaluation or loss of coherent working-class identities precipitates a turn to the past for some of the men here; looking backwards in this context provides a positive *resource* with which to defend against devaluation, while articulating loss.

Neil's tendency to dwell on images of the past in his writing was not, however, without its difficulties. In his academic work, he felt that his tutors did not always understand his reminiscence:

"Some tutors just didn't get anything I wrote and just had no ...understanding of my life or my background [...] There was a particular piece that I submitted [...] [The tutor] wasn't very complimentary about it. He described my style as somebody standing at a bar with a pint in his hand telling a story. I mentioned that that was the whole idea of it. It was a life writing piece. I'd written some sort of family folklore and you know the story had been told to me in solely that manner. Most of the stories that I wrote, family stories, had been passed down to me in that manner, at weddings and funerals [...] it doesn't make it [of] any less value [...] He just didn't get it."

Neil's narrative draws on collective remembrance in the form of 'family folklore', yet implementing this style of storytelling in an academic environment is not straightforward. Neil employs a narrative voice which he hoped would mimic 'somebody standing at a bar with a pint in his hand', yet crucially, Neil's analysis of his tutor's reaction to his writing shows how these fragments of his own cultural history are not understood, or validated, by the tutor: "*he just didn't get it.*" For Butler (1997:133), the 'production of the subject' is inextricably tied to the 'regulation of speech', but also 'through the regulation of the social domain of speakable discourse':

Here the question is not whether certain kinds of speech uttered by a subject are censored, but how a certain operation of censorship determines who will be a subject depending upon whether the speech of such a candidate for subjecthood obeys certain norms governing what is speakable and what is not. (*ibid.*)

Neil is asked to compose a piece of 'life writing', yet on the submission of his work Neil's narrative is both undermined and effectively 'censored', and this attempt at 'censorship' is significant in that it establishes 'who will be a subject'. By defying the accepted norms of writing on an academic course in the university, Neil finds not only that his writing is dismissed, but that he has also transgressed the speakable in Butler's terms, which accordingly challenges his capacity as a subject: 'If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or as the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject is called into question' (Butler, 1997:136).

'Flat-capping it' for Steve exemplifies an oppositional performance of class which operates against the dominant norms of the field; this type of performance calls into question such norms by challenging legitimated values. Neil's narrative shows a similar oppositional encounter has occurred, where recourse to 'family folklore' has interrupted the accepted norms of 'what is speakable' (Butler 1997:133), also pointing to the difficulty which many of the working-class participants in this research have in being recognized as valuable subjects, despite academic success. The category of 'working class' incorporates certain historical formations of value, which may mark out particular subjects as lacking; these formations are often made explicit in moments of encounter, so that it is his classed subjectivity *in the present* which is at stake here for Neil in his presentation of 'family folklore' to his tutor. However, his own personal investment in recording the 'family folklore' *of his past* provides Neil with an alternative space (and time) in which the possibility of a positive self-identification is realized.

Looking backwards challenges the assumption of teleological progress. As Buck-Morss (1991:95) notes in her discussion of Benjamin's work: 'A construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it *has actually taken place*, provides dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened)'. For the participants discussed in this article, there is no interest in 'forgetting what has happened', as they actively seek to redress the 'destruction' of working-class dignity. For Bonnett (2010:164), 'Attachments to the past and feelings of loss' have the potential to be used as 'potent resources for resistance and critique'. Strategies of remembrance, then, also become valuable tools in the struggle to resist the type of 'false disidentification' that Žižek (2000:103) understands ideology as creating.

Neil felt strongly that working-class people increasingly have "no understanding of their own pasts, their own backgrounds". Jimmy also commented that: "I think the ability to struggle and the ability to know what they're struggling against have been taken away". As he explains further:

"I feel different to a lot of [...] these students I've come across because they don't have the benefit of the kind of militant struggles I was involved in at an early age, in my formative years as a young man [...] I was in [the]ship building industry, it was very militant, and that made an interminable impression on me as to who and what I am and who and what I should be fighting against".

For certain participants in this project, the past has become a key resource in enabling the articulation of class-based identities in the present and I have been arguing that this goes beyond mere regression. Such a preoccupation with the past might have resulted in Neil being labelled a "dinosaur", yet as a resource the past provides an arena for the articulation of political 'struggle' in what appears to be a Benjaminian 'moment of danger'.

Conclusion: memory, myth and futurity

Dwelling on the past does not necessarily involve remembering history 'the way it really was' (Ranke, cited by Benjamin, 1999:247). Indeed, a nostalgic relationship to the past might be as much based on mythology as lived experience. The specific content of the 'myth' is perhaps less important than the shared meaning given to collective mythologies. Buck-Morss (1991:116) contends that:

...collective imagination mobilizes its powers for a revolutionary break from the recent past by evoking a cultural memory reservoir of myths and utopian symbols from a more distant ur-past. The 'collective wish images' are nothing else but this. Sparked by the new, from which they 'maintain their impulse,' they envision its revolutionary potential by conjuring up archaic images of the collective 'wish' for social utopia.

I would like to argue that this type of ‘cultural memory reservoir’ appears to be exactly the kind of archive which the participants in this study have been making recourse to as they look back to a different era. ‘Sparked by the new’ post-industrial landscape, Benjamin’s ‘collective wish images’ seem quite appropriate allegorical representations of the type of identity construction in which the participants here have been engaged. Dave viewed the concept of traditional working-class cohesion with “suspicion” in our interview, wondering if in fact this type of cohesive working-class consciousness ever really existed, a suspicion supported by Savage (2000:105). However, cohesive working-class consciousness can arguably be seen as a ‘collective wish image’; its objective existence might be disputed, yet the ‘myth’ of coherence is crucially excavated in the present as an identificatory resource.

For Keightley and Pickering (2012:117), nostalgia is ‘a composite framing of loss, lack and longing’, all of which exist in the narratives explored in this article: a loss of ‘valorized’ class-based identities; the lack at the core of contemporary representations of the working classes; and the longing inherent in these participants’ hopes for the future. I have argued that, for some of the participants in this project, looking to the past enables the possibility of imagining a viable future, one in which the value of working-class lives is accorded recognition and worth.

In discussing the nature of working-class lives in my interview with Neil, he feels that one of the key characteristics of what it means to be working-class is “a loyalty...to your past”. I have argued here that anchoring one’s identity in images of the past by nurturing the ‘mnemonic imagination’ (Keightley and Pickering, 2012; Pickering and Keightley, 2013) - be it through the nostalgic recollection of lived experience, ‘flat-capping it’, the narration of family folklore, or the invocation of a mythologized version of history - should not be dismissed as merely romantic or regressive. Instead, I have seen the turn to nostalgia – or the ‘struggle’ to have ‘the otherness of their particular pasts symbolically uttered and heard’ (Reading, 2011:378) - as a strategy for positive working-class identification by the participants discussed here, that is, an identification free from devaluation. I argue that the use of the past as a ‘resource’ in male working-class identity construction is fundamentally retroactive in this context; the fusing of memory and imagination here opens up a dialogue between individual strategies of identification based on a collective cultural landscape, and the wider social processes which shape the conditions and possibilities of identification (Keightley and Pickering, 2012). In this article, I have presented a particular kind of attachment to the past in order to argue that, in this context, nostalgia should be understood as a kind of critical tool, mobilised in the construction of class-based identities to refute devaluation. In this sense, nostalgia exemplifies a retroactive attachment to the past in its hopes for a better future.

Notes

¹ See for example the controversy caused by the *Daily Mail* newspaper’s reporting of the trial of Mick Philpott for the manslaughter of his six children in May 2012. The headline read ‘Vile product of welfare UK’ (Dolan and Bentley, 03.04.13, from the *Daily Mail* website, accessed 22.04.13).

² Substantial discrepancies exist in access to HE in England. A recent report from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2013:3) notes that: ‘Young people in the most disadvantaged areas would need to treble their participation rate in order to match the rate of those from the most advantaged areas’. Social class also plays a role in determining the type of institution attended, with those from more privileged backgrounds being considerably more likely to attend elite institutions than their ‘disadvantaged’ peers (see Harris, 2010).

³ Olick and Robbins (1998) provide a brief overview of ‘social memory studies’.

⁴ “Puddled” is a Lancastrian term meaning mad or stupid, according to Steve.

⁵ Flat caps are a style of men's hat associated with working-class culture.

⁶ Whippets are a breed of dog synonymous with working-class culture in the north of England.

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