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Academy of Management Annual Conference 2018

Critical Management Studies Division

Plenary paper

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**“The violence of the “we”
in the age of Brexit, Trump and the resurgence of the Far Right**

Aim

When I asked why I was being asked to give a plenary paper, and what should I talk about, the answer was ‘your class background’. I come from a working class family – left school at 16, got married at 18, started going to evening classes when I was 25, and then to university to study for my first degree when I was 27, the first member of my family to do so. My father was a coal miner (he was awarded a first degree when he was 80) and my ex-husband a coal miner too. The experience of growing up working class has forged in me a passion for the ‘critical’ in CMS.

So my aim in this talk is to turn my background into a source of data to be used to cast insights on the contemporary post-Brexit/Trumpian/right-dominated present.

And given the richness of variety of the people in ‘CMS’ to wonder what might emerge if others did this exercise.

On the original title

The days after Brexit: umbrage – ‘walk a mile in their shoes’, but an awful self-realisation.

The new title

But this is not a plenary paper: it’s a conversation starter.

Its inspiration

Theory is itself transformative, although it is not sufficient for social and political transformation. Something besides theory must take place, such as interventions at social and political levels that involve actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice [I]n all of these practices, theory is presupposed’ (Butler, 2004, p. 204).

So in this conversation starter I will do three things:

- use my own background as ‘data’ to try to develop some new forms of thinking that might push forward in some ways critical business school scholarship;

- posit the advantages of using a critical (not reflexive) exploration of one's own background as a form of critique and philosophising;
- acknowledge the importance of passion (rather than rationality) to much of our thought.

I will firstly explore the invisibilisation of 'the working class' and how they are marginalised in contemporary discourses (and at the same time kick one of those discourses). I will explore in more depth how 'the working class' has re-emerged onto the public/academic stage since Brexit/the rise of Trump/the rise of so-called 'populism', and how this re-emergence takes the form of a demonised, racist, incalcitrant and ignorant Other. I will stand in my working class shoes and look at myself in my middle class footwear. I will offer a 'passionate theory', one based on passion rather than evidence or philosophy, that suggests how we may push forward our thinking, and perhaps our politics. I will try to illustrate that theory in practice.

Methodology (if it can be called such a thing)

Inspired by Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* and Annette Kuhn's *Family Secrets*, plus also some of the books that are trying to understand the working class that seems to have made itself heard again in the votes for Brexit, Trump and right-wing parties.

Slide: A working class childhood (c.1959)

The invisibilisation of the working class in the UK

I'm starting my story in the late 50s/early 60s. At that time about 50% of the UK population was identified as working class (that is, in 'blue-collar' manual jobs); the proportions of people with a degree was tiny, and about 66% of the population left school at the minimum age. By 2010 the proportion of the population that was working class had fallen to about 20%, while the proportion educated to degree level was 25%. The working class by 2010 is outnumbered by a new middle class – primarily professional or semi-professional in nature. BUT there is a pattern of increasing identification as working class amongst those classified, by profession and education, as middle class – often amongst those who have working class fathers. It is not known how many of the white-collar jobs now held by people who in previous generations would have been employed in manual work are 'bullshit jobs' (Graeber, 2018).

The disappearance of the working class in the UK

Evans and Tilley (2017) argue that the apparent disappearance of the working class (defined by occupation and education) and class politics has arisen from politicians and the media converging on middle class voters and the exclusion of the working class from the political mainstream and from public attention. 'Class was consigned to political history not by the blurring of classes, but by the actions of politicians' (p. 11). The political parties have chosen not to represent class differences, leading to a

decline in electoral participation by members of the working class (Evans and Tilley's book was written, although not published, before Brexit).

How the working class is excluded from the media (one example).

The strange case of the baby boomers who are responsible for the UK's housing crisis and wrecking the lives of the millennial generation.

See slides.

But this is an easy example. I will argue that there is a similar language of hurt and rage used when analysing Brexit (my case study). It constitutes an Other that is not allowed to speak, and through that inhibits thought/political action/etc.

South Wales

Background 2: South Wales and Coal mining

Slide: the coal mining job.

In 1920 there were 1,191,000 people employed in the UK's coal mining industry, and in 1960 (which is where my story starts) there were 607,000, at the start of the 1984/1985 year-long miners' strike there were c. 237,000, by 1990 this had shrunk to 49,000, to 11,000 by 2000, and almost none thereafter.

Such was the rate of growth in the population of the South Wales coalfields between 1901 and 1911 that South Wales absorbed immigrants at a faster rate than anywhere in the world except the USA (<http://www.agor.org.uk/cwm/themes/life/society/migration.asp>). My father's parents were part of this migration. They moved to the South Wales Valleys from rural Shropshire in the early years of the 20th century, where my grandfather worked on the railways. My mother's parents appear to have been local. My maternal grandfather was a cook in the Welsh Regiment and was gassed in WW1 and was unable to work after that. But he was a friend of Aneurin Bevan, who established the NHS. My father was born in 1920, left school aged 14 during the Great Depression, had little work until he joined the RAF a year before the outbreak of WWII. He was very intelligent but the class system in the UK militated against his developing his talents. Similarly my mother – class and gender militated against her doing anything outside the home. She was a frustrated nurse.

My father 'went down the pits' in 1955 when my parents were expecting their third child. He had worked as a ganger on the railways since the end of WWII, where his pay was £4 a week. By going down the pit his pay rose to £11 a week. The coal mines were still a major source of employment, albeit dirty and dangerous, when my (ex) husband went to work down the pit in 1971.

The end of coal mining in South Wales – photo of ex-husband on the day his coalmine closed

1963 – six siblings (photo)

My working class life in 1963 – see slide.

The French sociologist Didier Eribon has written recently about how it was more difficult to come out in French academic circles as working class than it was to come out as gay. My own experience is of a deep sense of shame but also a fierce pride.

Six siblings plus one today.

Between us we have:

17 children and one step-child;

c. 40 grand-children

Two great-grandchildren.

Two bachelors degrees (both as mature students) and one Ph.D. (Plus our dad graduated with a B.A when he was 80).

Who does what: very little social or geographic mobility (details of each sibling's work). Slide showing Fifi, working on zero-hour contracts in a variety of factories until ill-health forced her to give up work last year. She was devastated – she loves to work.

Very little social or geographic mobility.

My annual income is more than all my siblings' income put together.

But the family is far from homogeneous

We cover the political spectrum, most are just getting by, but life isn't full of despair.

However, the family has homogeneity thrust upon it

It seems to tick many of the 'Brexit' boxes, or statistics about who voted Brexit and who remain. (Fewer qualifications; older; deprived white working class).

It is a small step from discussing populations to presuming what individual members of those populations 'are'.

There is a fault-line distinguishing the 'we' from the 'they', and it appears to be immigration. 'We are not racist; 'they' are'.

The re-appearance of the working class as an Other

The 'we' and the silenced other (1) Observer: Sunday 5th August

Aaron Hicklin interviewing Thomas Page McBee
<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/aug/05/my-fight-to-be-a-man>

Referring to Obama's time in office, Hicklin writes

'As we all know now, whatever optimism we felt then was about to be upended by Brexit and the election of Trump'

Look closer at that little 'we' and the 'optimism' 'we' felt. This becomes the global 'we' through its extension in the 'all'. It constructs the Brexit/Trump voters as destroyers; ignores the fact that large swathes of two populations may not have been feeling optimistic; pits the 'we' against the unnamed, destructive other. It need not have been written this way – sufficient to say 'This was before the Brexit vote and the election of Trump'. It invites me, the reader of a newspaper designed for educated, left-leaning readers, to align myself with the 'all' and against this seemingly malign voting other.

Et tu, CMS?

- Grey's (2017) very thoughtful and agonised self-examination of CMS and Brexit self-consciously discusses a CMS 'us' and a leave-voting, working class 'them';
- 'What this adds up to, then, is that for CMS as for many on the liberal-left, working class voters were asking the right question but gave the "wrong answer". If emancipation from oppression and opposition to neo-liberal globalization (exemplified by the financial crisis) are the hallmarks of CMS then the working class has decided to emancipate itself by embracing nativism (often with a racist element), populism, nationalism and illiberalism.'

The Other looks back (with due acknowledgement that I am speaking from the position of remembered injuries)

Grey, 2018:

'The marginalised, oppressed and powerless (that CMS favours against the privilege and power of the elite) have in large numbers voted against much that CMS believes in and positioned CMS as part of a privileged and powerful elite establishment which they despise: perhaps that was always so'.

The Davies family:

'Not so much of the marginalised, oppressed and powerless, butty. Those are demeaning terms meant to put 'us' in 'our' place'. They elevate 'you' to a superior position as the one that can 'favour' us.

And can academics honestly claim not to be oppressed and powerless, even though they may be relatively prosperous?

Me

What I'm exploring here is how concepts, identities and so on are framed (Butler), or how they arise from an agentive cut in a multitudinous flux (Barad) or how why only a limited range of possibilities arise out of a convergence that offered a myriad of possible forms (Simondon).

There are many ways in which to frame 'the' working class, rather than freezing them in this particular position.

And there are so many ways in which to understand Brexit/Trump/neo-Fascism, but understanding becomes frozen within a set of assumptions.

With the risk that it can be a surprise for researchers to discover that non-academics are 'nuanced analysts of social structural processes, and articulate a more coherent and detailed conception than implied by much literature in the area (Irwin, 2018:214)

So

So when, for example, the CfP for a stream on Brexit in the last CMS conference noted, on its first page, that 'One of the most apparent and shocking features in the wake of the vote has been the surge in hatred attacks, including those engendering racisms, xenophobia, and homophobia, with some media reporting as much as a 147% rise in July, August and September 2016.
<https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/business/files/2016/11/48-Brexiting-CMS-Call-for-Papers.pdf>

Repeated in the CfP of a special edition of *Organization*, with the additional comment that 'Brexit seems to have legitimised the expression of belief in [the] legitimacy of racism, xenophobia and associated behaviour' (p. 2).The referendum has unleashed brutal forces'

Next slide

Then out of the flux of things happening in the aftermath of Brexit:

- the most vile and obnoxious (and temporary?) are highlighted;
- And the aging, under-educated, under-employed population Brexiting working class becomes homogenised as racist, xenophobic and violent.

That is, 'we', a richly diverse academic population, through our biases and prejudices reduce another richly diverse population to nothing but its biases and prejudices.

The other of the other

On immigrant labourers: James Bloodworth, working in 'low-wage Britain' (2018)

- Workers who, when they first come to Britain, 'are unaware of their rights as tenants, are walking wedges of currency for [a] rising class of rapacious rentiers' (p. 24);
- 'The spread of precarious work, propped up by an army of exploited labourers speaking in incomprehensible tongues, inevitably fuels [anti-immigration sentiments]' p 32);
- 'As for my Romanian co-workers [in an Amazon warehouse], most of them lacked even a rudimentary understanding of the rights bestowed on a typical British worker. However harshly they were treated, in their minds such a regime was normal; it was simply what happened in England, a country where there were two types of people: those who wanted you to go home and those who wrote letters to liberal newspapers waxing colourfully about how wonderful and hard-working you were' (p. 53).

That is, rather than drawing a line between an illiberal, racist W.C opposed to migrant workers

- It is necessary to collapse the binary between the 'native' and the 'migrant' and explore instead an oppressed precariat;
- Thus removing 'blame' from 'the' working class and instead directing our attention to where it should be directed;
- Through exploring how the conditions of old and new forms of oppression are instigated, constituted and maintained – and that allow a dangerous politics to breed;

Next slide

Passion

- This argument was provoked by the deep sense of shame instilled in me during a working class childhood in which cultural norms told me I was dirty, inferior, utterly unworthy;
- I re-experienced those feelings as I read the analyses of Brexit (as you may have detected)
- That childhood instilled in the adult, academic me a hatred of hierarchies, the privileging of certain voices over others, the need for everyone's voice to be heard;

- And as I've sat and listened to plenary talks in the past I've thought if it was me up there at the lectern I'd share the stage with others whose voices should be heard today, and not decades in the future;
- So (handover to two younger academics)

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/brexit-and-the-squeezed-middle/>

The 'left-behind' theory collapses under more nuanced studies.