

Past and present: the condition of the working class replayed

Mike Wayne and Deirdre O'Neill describe their new documentary film inspired by Friedrich Engels' classic book

What happens when a category disappears from public discourse and consciousness, but the realities to which that category refers continue to shape our lives?

In such circumstances, we can expect various social and individual pathologies where effects can no longer be traced back to root causes. The disappearance of class as a framework to understand the world and address problems within it has left us precisely in this situation.

In the political sphere, class has been replaced by the barely disguised prejudices of an elite whose members talk of "strivers" and "scroungers". There has also been a retreat from class across the disciplines in academia, even through empirical sociologists, who want to look, still find class to be the biggest determinant on health, education, employment opportunities, your relationship to the criminal justice system, where you live, what you eat and when you die.

In the media, the pathologies of representation manifest themselves in a series of one-dimensional stereotypes where the working class are either vilified or laughed at. Our media outlets are dominated by a middle class with increasingly little contact, connection or solidarity with the working class. This means that knowledge of working class lives, at a time where there is increasing class segregation in terms of where people live and where they educate their children, is reliant on representations shot through with prejudice, ignorance and distortion. As

a consequence, the means of communication are closed to the working class who are unable to author their own stories and control their own narratives.

More than 160 years ago, the working class had a thriving press and political culture of their own. It was the Chartist *Northern Star* that working people read, not *The Sun*. But it still took a radical intellectual from Germany, with all the benefits of a long classical education, to sift the experiences of the working class into an explosive historical, sociological and political synthesis. Friedrich Engels was only 24 when he wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. His father co-owned a cotton factory in Manchester and he sent the young Engels from Germany to work there, hoping that his radical son would settle down and become a respectable member of the bourgeoisie. But what Engels found in Manchester, at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, turned him into a revolutionary.

The shock of reading Friedrich Engels' 1844 book today is a double one. First, that disappearing category, class, is central to his analysis of England in the early years of the Industrial Revolution and how economic inequalities shaped every aspect of life. And second, even more shockingly, Engels' class analysis remains strikingly relevant for us today.

In 1844, England was a society cleaved in two. Then, as now, the unequal power relations between the workers and the bourgeoisie shaped this



A unique theatre and film project initiated a collaborative process in which working-class people could tell their own stories

world at every level: from the economy, politics, education, law and order, and even the urban geography of the city (with the workers living quarters kept out of sight from the rich). Once we put aside the image of extreme Victorian squalor suffered by the workers and look at these broader power relations, we can see the continuities between the condition of the working class then and the condition of the working class now.

Take, for example, what Engels says about the link between inequality and crime: "He is poor, life offers him no charm, almost every enjoyment is denied him, the penalties of the law have no further terrors for him; why should he restrain his desires, why leave to the rich the enjoyment of his birthright, why not seize a part of it for himself? What inducement has the proletariat not to steal? It is all very pretty and very agreeable to the ear of the bourgeoisie to hear the 'sacredness of property' asserted; but for him who has none, the sacredness of property dies out itself."

And now think about what the representatives of the bourgeoisie said

the disguise of peace and even philanthropy, the only help for the working men [sic] consists in laying bare the true state of things and destroying this hypocrisy."

Certainly, the bourgeoisie have changed since Engels' time. They are today more international, more removed from our local lives, more abstract, and networked into a set of complex and hugely powerful interlocking institutions. Our contact with them is highly mediated and is likely to take the form of a huge gas or electricity bill dropping onto our doormat or a redundancy notice issued from human resources. But they are still there.

At a time when we are returning to the unrestrained *laissez faire* capitalism of the 19th century by rolling back the gains of the welfare state, we wanted to demonstrate the relevance of Engels' book to a contemporary audience. To do this, we turned to film and theatre. We issued an open call in Manchester and Salford (where else?) for volunteers to take part in a theatrical production that would draw both on their own experiences and Engels' book. They would write, devise and perform a show for a live audience, from scratch, in a little more than eight weeks. This process would be filmed, from first rehearsal to first night and would form the backbone to our documentary film.

Our aim was that the whole show would be built on the class experiences of the people who took part in the project. Our approach was a collective one in which people shared their own stories and anecdotes or brought in their own poems or dramatic sketches. This was the raw material that became the basis of the play. This unique theatre and film project initiated a creative, collaborative and political process in which working-class people could tell their own stories, rather than have their narratives told by people who had no experience of being working class. They were invited to be agents in a way that is rare these days in both the media and in the political process.

We see the cast reflecting on the process of their own stories coming to dramatic life and how that process changes the way they think about those

"Many connected his words with their situation"

made that quite apparent. However, such elementary truths were buried under a rhetoric that declared the riots as "criminality, pure and simple".

To this, Engels already wrote his reply in 1844: "It must always be kept in mind that the social war is avowedly raging in England; and that, whereas it is in the interest of the bourgeoisie to conduct this war hypocritically, under



The welfare state is being dismantled and we are returning to 19th century *laissez faire* capitalism

experiences. This was a group of strangers who discovered that they were not actually strangers because they recognised their own lives in the stories that others told. This was true across the generations, so that a woman in her 60s talking about how her accent was made fun of by her grammar school peers, chimes with another story by a young woman who encounters similar class discrimination in her school 40 years later. Over the course of the eight weeks, a number of random individuals had forged a class identity and consciousness and become a theatrical troupe, The Ragged Collective.



Still relevant: Friedrich Engels

The making of the theatre show forms the narrative backbone to our film but it was important that we situated the process in the wider context of working-class history and contemporary events. The older members of the cast provided a reference point to the 1980s and Margaret Thatcher's revolution, which we are still living. Archive footage provided a reference point to the founding of the welfare state in the 1940s and Engels' text provided the reference point to the savage capitalism of the 19th century to which we are returning. The experiences of want, need and discrimination are recycled in different forms across the generations.

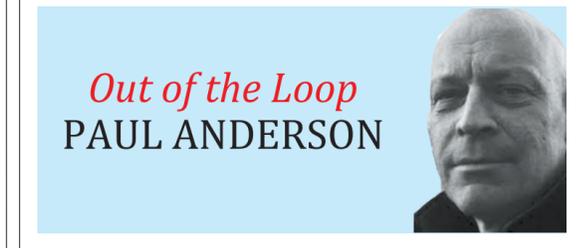
When the historical consciousness and language required to articulate these continuities disappears, then that can only be disadvantageous to the working class. When we took the camera out onto the streets of Salford and Manchester and interviewed members of the public, we found that most people had not heard of Friedrich Engels. This is unsurprising, given that the civic authorities have largely failed to acknowledge the presence and significance of Engels in the history of the two cities. However, when we asked people to read a passage from Engels' book, many of them on the spot were

able to connect his words with their own situation, just as the theatrical cast was doing.

Our film, inspired by Engels' book, is a testament to the struggles, the solidarity, the humour and resilience, in the face of all the odds, of the working class. There was and remains a class struggle in this country. To the extent that we fail to recognise this, then the class struggle is simply being waged and won by the dominant class.

Last words, then, must go to Engels, who knew what we have forgotten: "The workers must... strive to escape from this brutalising condition, to secure for themselves a better, more human position; and this they cannot do without attacking the interest of the bourgeoisie which consists in exploiting them. But the bourgeoisie defends its interests with all the power placed at its disposal by wealth and the might of the state. In proportion as the working man determines to alter the present state of things, the bourgeois becomes his avowed enemy."

The Condition of the Working Class will be screened in The House of Commons, Grand Committee Room, on Tuesday June 11 at 7.30pm. For more information and screenings around the UK, go to: www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info



Less of a game changer and more of a failure

The death of Margaret Thatcher has prompted a wave of public controversy that is extraordinary – if only because she had not been a player in British politics for so long. She left office in 1990 and had only a minor role after that – notably in criticising her successor as Prime Minister, John Major, for his failings on former Yugoslavia (on which she was right) and the European Union (on which she was wrong). No one now under the age of 43 voted in an election in which she was a candidate; no one under 52 was a voter when she became Prime Minister.

On the home front, her Government destroyed the power of the trade unions – aided by the inept leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers – and privatised the utilities and most of the nationalised industries. It let council tenants buy their homes, allowed manufacturing industry to collapse, started the deregulation of the City and radically curtailed the autonomy of local government. In foreign policy, there was the Falklands, resolute pursuit of the Cold War and a policy on Europe that favoured the single market but opposed anything smacking of federalism.

She did what she did with a distinctive style, which you either loved or loathed if you were around at the time.

But was Thatcher really the game-changer that both her fans and her critics claim? It's true that the unions have never recovered from their 1980s defeats – and the chances of any future government engaging in a programme of renationalisation are small, if only because of the Thatcher years, where they weren't crudely implemented adjustments to the inevitable, look increasingly thin and very much reversible.

Coal and steel would have withered in the face of international competition under any government: Thatcher's approach brutally hastened their demise and maximised the pain to communities reliant on heavy industry for work. Manufacturing would also have declined under any government because of competition from the Far East, although it was made worse by the absence of any coherent industrial policy from the Thatcher Government (or its successors). Deregulation of the City – continued by subsequent administrations, Tory and

Labour – gave us the crisis of 2008 from which we are yet to recover despite massive state intervention to rescue the banks. The sale of council housing to tenants was a bonanza for those who bought, massively subsidised by the taxpayer, but councils were not allowed to use the receipts to build new homes, and right-to-buy owners soon sold up to buy-to-let landlords who charged obscene rents paid by housing benefit. Now we've got a housing crisis.

As for foreign policy – well, the Falklands really doesn't matter except for patriotic myth-makers, and the Cold War is long over. Thatcher was ineffectual in its last phase. She might have identified Mikhail Gorbachev as a man with whom she could do business, but she resisted the removal of nuclear weapons from Europe in the late '80s and opposed the unification of Germany in 1989. On the European Community, her record was disastrous. Britain's bone-headed obstructionism under her watch in the late 1980s played a key part in framing the Maastricht treaty on European Union along lines that have since 2008 been exposed as idiotic – a central bank committed to quell inflation and nothing else, no European federal government.

Thatcher seemed a big figure, but she wasn't really. She won the 1979 general election with a small majority because Labour's corporatism had failed – and then got lucky. She won massive majorities in 1983 and 1987 after a small part of the Labour leadership defected to set up an Atlanticist pro-Europe centrist party in alliance with the Liberals. She then became a heroine of the anti-European right, which took control of the Conservative Party in the 1990s and lost three general elections in a row.

And that's it. There's not a lot in the legacy to fear, apart from the remarkable success of her appeal to affluent working class in 1983 and 1987. Can David Cameron do the same in 2015? Almost certainly not – and that's despite the fact that, with the help of the Liberal Democrats, he's engaged on a plan to shrink the state that Thatcher could only dream about.

I'm not dancing on her grave, but she was a failure whose reputation will fade as soon as Britain elects a decent democratic socialist government.